**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC**

**101 Pondfield Road West**

**Bronxville, New York**

***October 8, 2017*** ***Jesus and the Decalogue* Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

***GOD OF GRACE AND GOD OF GLORY***

The tragic events in Las Vegas have shaken us as individuals, as a nation, and as a world community. Why would someone choose to inflict death and pain on so many people? We may never know the answer. And after all, the more important questions might be, “How did he inflict death and pain on so many people, and how can we eliminate that possibility in the future?”

In turbulent, difficult times like these, people of all faiths turn to God in both in prayer and in music for solace, for strength and for determination. And so let us pray:

*God of compassion, you know the ways of all of us and weave out of terrible happenings, wonders of goodness and grace. Surround those who are shaken by overwhelming loss with the presence of your love. Strengthen them and all of us in faith. Though many are lost in grief, may they find you and be comforted, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who was dead, but lives and loves this world with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Our Processional Hymn is powerful encouragement “for the facing of this hour” / “for the living of these days.” The music of “God of Grace and God of Glory” was composed by John Hughes. The hymn’s unforgettable words are by Harry Emerson Fosdick, the first minister of Riverside Church in the City of New York. I believe this hymn of 1930 was written for the dedication of Riverside Church, also in 1930. It is frequently sung at Riverside, both in times of crisis and in times of celebration. It has become an unofficial anthem of the church.

**THE OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS** Exodus 20:1-20

In today’s Old Testament Witness the Israelites are still wandering in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Here Moses is on Mt Sinai. God declares the Ten Commandments to Moses, which Moses then brings down the mountain to his people.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Matthew 21:23-32

“The Parable of the Wicked Tenants” is yet another puzzling parable of Jesus.

**SERMON**

The meaning of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants becomes clearer when we identify the cast of characters: The landowner is God. The wicked tenants are the chief priests and Pharisees. The slaves who are killed by the tenants are John the Baptist and other prophets who come foretelling a Kingdom of God that is open to everyone, everyone who repents and believes. And finally, the murdered son of the landowner is none other than Jesus, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus tells the Parable of the Wicked Tenants to the chief priests and Pharisees to warn them that although they may arrest, try, and even kill him, he will become the cornerstone of faith in God, the cornerstone that they reject. Jesus doesn’t say in the parable that faith in him will replace the Ten Commandments as the cornerstone of faith, but Jesus *is* implying this when he says, “I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.”

In other words the kingdom of God will be given not to the followers of the Law but to those who follow Jesus’ teaching to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

The chief priests and Pharisees are always trying to trick Jesus into saying something that breaks religious law, so that they can do away with him. Through the parable, Jesus is getting back at the chief priests and Pharisees, as Jesus loves to do, telling them that their killing of the prophets and even their killing of him will be in vain. Jesus is teaching that the chief priests and Pharisees are but wicked tenants, and that they will be punished for their disloyalty to God, the landowner and His son.

*“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they realized that Jesus was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest Jesus, but they feared the crowds, because the crowds regarded Jesus as a prophet.”* (Matthew 21:45-46)

You can imagine the frustration and anger of the chief priests and Pharisees. For after all, Jesus is preaching heresy. Jesus is preaching that Love is above the Law, that God’s love of all people is a gift God freely gives, a gift that we are to share with our neighbor in loving gratitude to God.

The chief priests and Pharisees have built their religion, not to mention their lives, on scrupulous attention to religious Law, the letter of the Law, rather than the meaning and purpose of the Law.

The chief priests and Pharisees criticize Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, a day of rest, that goes all the way back to the Ten Commandments. Jesus responds that the Sabbath is made for people, not people for the Sabbath. According to Jesus, deeds of love and mercy are permitted and even encouraged on the Sabbath, as a way of loving God and loving neighbor.

My first year in divinity school I learned something about the Christian faith that I had not known nor even thought about. I learned that Jesus transcends the Ten Commandments. I had always assumed that the Ten Commandments are the cornerstone of our faith. But now I believe that Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith, transcending the Ten Commandments. Jesus doesn’t negate nor does he replace the Ten Commandments but he gives them meaning for daily life.

The academic name for the Ten Commandments is the Decalogue (with a capital ‘D”). “Deca” means ten, and “logue” means words. Biblical scholars believe that the original Ten Commandments were in an even more abbreviated form than they appear in the Book of Exodus. The interpretations of some of the Ten Commandments were added later.

When we analyze the Ten Commandments, we see that only two of the commandments are positive, telling us what to do: the Fourth Commandment “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy,” and the Fifth Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother.”

The other eight Commandments are negative, telling us what not to do.

1. Have no other gods before the Lord your God.

2. Make no idols.

3. Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God.

6. You shall not murder.

7. You shall not commit adultery.

8. You shall not steal.

9. You shall not bear false witness

10. You shall not covet.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a deeper meaning to the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not murder,” saying that if you are angry with your brother, insulting, or name calling, you will be liable to judgment.

And about the Commandment “You shall not commit adultery,” Jesus says that adulterous thoughts are as significant as what we do. What is in our heart matters as much as what we do.

In Matthew 5, the first chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: “You think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17) … Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20)

Jesus transcends the Ten Commandments because he tells us what to do, rather than what not to do. And what to do is what we really need to know.

*“A scribe … asked Jesus, which commandment is the first of all? Jesus answered, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.’”* (Mark 12:28-31) *“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

(Matthew 20:40)

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE**  *Be Thou My Vision*

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