

Covenant

If you have ever adopted a dog with a checkered past, you may have some experience with *separation anxiety*. (I'm told parents of toddlers experience this also.)

And what is separation anxiety other than a fear that the one we love, the one we *need*, might not be *trusted* to come back?

Our dog Jack was a mess of separation anxiety when we adopted him, culminating with his attempt to chew through the doorjamb after I left one morning. That was the day we embraced crate-training. And then there was the first time he ate my hearing aid, but that's another story for another day. It took nearly a year of constant reinforcement, constant consistent behavior, before he was again the dog he was meant to be.

When we moved to Atlanta, the separation anxiety returned.

Thankfully, it was less dramatic this time, and I used bribery to make it better. There's nothing like throwing a treat into the crate twenty-five times a day to make a chow-hound wander in to make sure he's not missing out on anything!

By the time we moved to Philadelphia, though, it was old-hat to him, and he did fine.

Why do we begin with a story plumbing the depths of doggie psychology?

Because the reality of living with a reactive creature (and we're all reactive creatures) reminds me of the importance of constancy and consistency. That is how dogs learn to trust. That is how *anyone* learns to trust, and that reminds me of the importance of our covenant life together.

A covenant life together is based on trust.

Exodus 20 is all about trust. Exodus 20 is all about a covenant life together.

Classically, many call this passage the Ten Commandments. Certainly, there is a flavor of command about them. God does say them, after all. (They are so much a part of the cultural vernacular as "the Ten Commandments" that my spell checker flagged them as an error when I failed to capitalize the words "ten" and "commandments!")

But in the Hebrew tradition, they are more accurately called the Decalogue; the ten words. They are God's ten words about how to live a good life.

Together these ten words from God comprise the heart of the law, the heart of God's definition of covenant community. These ten words describe the relationship between the people who are God's people.

Theologians write about the two tables of the law, dividing them into the first table of the law, which is about how we relate to God, and the second table of the law, which is about how we relate to each other.

God gave the law, which is outlined in the chapters of around these ten words and in greater detail in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, because God cares about how we live together. God cares that we learn to trust one another and learn to be with one another. What God wants for God's people is a covenant community.

There are many ways to describe the narrative arc of the Old Testament. Sometimes it is characterized as the rise, fall, and redemption of God's people, Israel. But it would not be at all inaccurate to trace the story of the Bible, from the Old Testament into the new, as the story of God making and keeping covenants.

What is a covenant?

It is an unbreakable bond. When God makes covenants with God's people, it is because God is trustworthy to keep them. The Bible is the unfolding story of God's covenants. We read of God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel and David. They are promises that God always keeps, regardless of whether the other party has maintained faith.

Moreover, the idea of covenant is so serious, so profound, that in the ancient near east when a covenant was made there were a couple of ways of signifying the importance of the covenant. One was to swear upon one's reproductive capacity in a subsistence culture where ongoing family was most definitely *not* assured. I'm not saying another word about how *that* was done. The other was to sacrifice an animal, the size of the animal being commensurate with the magnitude of the covenant. In the sacrifice of the animal, it would be divided into two halves and the two parties to the covenant would walk between the two halves in order to signify, "May thus and worse happen to me if I do not keep my word."

Graphic, no?

Indeed, when God made covenant with Abraham, a bull was sacrificed and God caused Abraham to fall asleep while God walked alone between the bull halves in order to keep Abraham from taking the culpability of failing his covenant on to himself.

God makes the covenants with us – indeed God makes the covenants for us, taking the culpability of failure on to God's own self, because God cares so passionately about how we live together. God wants God's people to live in love. That's why God makes a covenant for us.

Covenants are serious.

Covenants are the foundation upon which a trusting community is formed.

Covenant communities are the communities we trust to be there for us. They are the communities we count on when we aren't able to carry the load for ourselves.

A pastor friend of mine invited the chairman of a major corporation, a well-respected man with no church home, to come to his church for a service of worship he anticipated might speak to his friend. Bill preached a moving sermon, the hymns and the anthems soared, and at the end of the service, his wealthy friend came up to him and said, "Bill, you were right, I *was* moved. In fact, I was so moved that I gave an offering, but all I had was a hundred-dollar bill, so I sort of shuffled it under the other offerings so it wouldn't look ostentatious."

Bill said, "Thank you, that's very generous."

Bill said to me later, "What I really wanted to say to him was, 'You don't need to hide your hundred-dollar bill. That couple over there, they're both teachers. You probably pay more in taxes in a quarter than they will earn all year. They have small children and they live on a budget, but they still give a hundred dollars every single week. Do you want to know why? *Because they know what it is to be part of a covenant community.'*"

God wants for us to be part of something that upholds us.

That is why I object to the objectification of the Ten Commandments. When they show up outside of a covenant community, perhaps in civic locations without the context of God's sacrificial love, their presence risks implying that they are a stick with which God intend to beat us, and with which God expects us to beat each other.

The Decalogue is not a measuring device of whether we are good. It is an instruction sheet to build our community around.

God wants good relationships for us.

That's why God spends the first five commandments telling us how we should relate to God.

We are told to trust God, not idols.

We are told to worship God, and keep Sabbath.

We are told to respect God, not making oaths using God's name that we will not keep.

God wants a relationship based on trust.

Then God spends the next five telling us how God wants us to relate to each other.

Once again, the relationships are based on trust.

"Be trustworthy!" God says, "Don't be someone who lies, cheats, steals, runs around on your partner, or grasps at what others have."

God has a plan for what life together looks like, and when we live it over time, it becomes community. It becomes a community in which we want to invest ourselves. It becomes God's outreach to the world to show that there is a way that is civil, that is good.

We do not have to look far to see where things are not the way they're supposed to be.

Before worship recently, Laura and I were chatting about the words we use, and I observed that so much of what the church says is appropriately specific.

We use particular words in particular ways to mean particular things.

But oftentimes, our words are freighted with other meanings.

Sin is one such word. We hear it, and perhaps we think of the teary televangelists of the eighties confessing their extra-marital affairs. Or we hear it with a weight of condemnation, perhaps about inalienable aspects of one's self.

When that happens, we lose something. In the case of sin, we lose the chance to reflect on the breakdown of shalom, of God's intention for creation that we should live in balanced well-being. That's what *shalom* is: A balanced well-being for the other and ourselves. Sin, at a basic level, is the breakdown, or even the vandalism of *shalom*.

Sin, the vandalism of Shalom, the breakdown of community, has been with us from the minute we were driven east of Eden. And we know its effects.

The epidemic of bullying behavior that seems to be targeting adolescents particularly harshly has its beginning in the violation of a desire for balanced well-being.

When we create a culture in which a desire for balanced well-being isn't a priority for adults, how could we possibly expect adolescents to behave any better than us?

When our political rhetoric screams from the fringes that the other side is not worthy of respect, indeed that ideological opponents are traitors, should it come as any surprise when judges and elected officials live in fear, not of this rash of swatting, but that a deranged opponent will threaten their lives and families?

God's establishment of a covenant community, of which we are the heirs, of which we are the beneficiaries, is God's answer to the brokenness that comes when we experience a breakdown in civility and trust.

So, if we are to hear a great, "Thou shalt not!" from this text, it is perhaps more rightly, "Thou shalt NOT value thyself and thy neighbor less than I do!"

God's covenant community can seem at times as the minority report to answer the incivility with which we sometimes find ourselves surrounded.

I threw doggie treats into a crate in order to show that it was a good place, and that I could be trusted to come back. When we adopted another dog with a hard past, she was afraid of me at night. Only at night, never during the day. So, month after month, I waited for her to decide when to come to me, and now we are fine at night.

Trust takes time, and work, to establish.

Trust is established by consistency and constancy, and frankly, being *trustworthy*.

God's covenants are the marker of God's trustworthiness.

When God invites us, with the Decalogue to be a part of that covenant community, we're invited to be moving markers of God's trustworthiness.

While I would never equate doggie treats in a crate with joining together in the Lord's Supper, or gathering at the font, what we're really doing is reminding ourselves of the grace of God in which we trust.

Do you remember what grace is?

It's the undeserved, unmerited, and *unconditional* love of God.

We worship so we may remember that it is in a God who loves us that we place our trust.

Our mutual trust in God shows us how to live together.

We learn, together, to be a community of faith.

We learn, together, to trust one another.

And that is the point of the Ten Commandments.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.