

“Living Law”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 8, 2023 - Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 22

[Exodus 20:1-4, 4-7, 12-20; Matthew 21:33-46](#)

Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions... Am I leaving anything out of the list of ingredients of this American culinary delight known as the Big Mac? But of course, the Big Mac is not complete without the sesame seed bun!

So you can probably list, thanks to a catchy jingle, the seven ingredients of a Big Mac. Now do you think you can list, in order, each of the Ten Commandments? I hope you can at least remember some of them. And if so, you're doing better than most. A recent survey of 1,000 Americans demonstrated that more people know some or all of the ingredients of the Big Mac than they do some or all of the Commandments. Of the survey participants who claimed to go to church each week, only 70% knew the commandment "You shall not murder," and less than half remembered "Honor your father and your mother."

And yet, how many church-going, Bible-thumping folk desire to have the Ten Commandments prominently displayed in our public spaces, such as the stone monument of the commandments installed on the grounds of the capitol building in Texas? (I do wonder what the engraver of this monument was thinking while carving in stone the second rule, "Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven images"). Anyway, it seems to me that many of us are more interested in revering -- or worshipping even -- the Ten Commandments as a symbol of "biblical" rule than we are about knowing what the commandments actually are. We would all be better off if those of us who claim the commandments as part of our own religious tradition, instead of fetishizing them and seeking to have everyone else do so as well, would live them out, or better yet, live in ways that honor the principles behind them by loving God and loving our neighbors always and in all ways.

This was one of the main messages of Jesus in his day, that what really matters in life is not knowing a collection of rules that were given to help other people in their unique context of life to love God and one another, but that we live in ways

in our own context that honor God and encourage life to flourish in others. In giving this message, he echoed the prophets of Israel who came before him, and he found, like the prophets, that his message was not appreciated by the religious and political leaders who held and maintained their power over others by requiring that their specific religious rules be followed.

In today's lesson from Matthew, Jesus offers a parable about the religious leaders of his day, who are compared to a group of wicked tenants, who had been entrusted by a vineyard owner to care for and work the property so that it would produce a rich harvest for the owner, but who instead abused and killed those sent by the owner to collect the produce, keeping it all for themselves. The parable teaches that God, the vineyard owner, seeks to have a fruitful vineyard, that is a community of life-filled, life-giving people, and that God has provided leaders for the people, not to take from them, but to care for them and to help them grow as a community of faith, that they might more faithfully live out the principles behind the Ten Commandments, fruitfully giving glory to God and growing in love for each other.

God has given this job of caring for the vineyard to us as well. We are called to be caretakers of God's garden, helping each other in this community to be more fruitful in loving God and others. We do this not by mindlessly following some religious regimen, but by consciously and willfully living the law of love here in this community. And so it is our sacred practice to consider and reconsider ways that we can be more loving as a household of faith.

Today is Access Sunday, and we, along with many other congregations of the United Church of Christ are focusing on how we are growing in love for each other by providing ways to include every member of our church community in our worship and work. As many of us have bodies that limit us in some way, finding ways to including each other requires vigilance and ongoing effort. We have made progress in our goal of becoming more welcoming and inclusive of all by installing ramps and restrooms that can be used by all. We have devices that allow those who need assistance hearing to better participate in our worship; and all of our services stream live on services that provide real-time captioning for those who are unable to hear and the ability for those whose bodies do not allow them to leave their homes, hospitals, or care facilities to still be included in our

worship. And though all our services are streamed and can be viewed live or later on smartphones, tablets, computers, or on TV, as all our services also run throughout the week on Stoneham TV, some are unable to access these technologies, and so the deacons and I visit our local nursing home and our local elder housing facility each month to offer worship services, including communion.

And your church staff is looking at other ways we can increase our welcome for people of all abilities, as we did just last week by installing an awning at the top of our ramp to this floor, which you should check out after the service if you haven't already seen it or entered under it. But let us all continue to seek ways to better include one another with our various abilities because we are a community guided by our commitment to love and support one another. Let us always live in this highest way of love, not only for one another, but for those in our homes and neighborhoods and around the world, that God's law may exist not only on tablets of stone, but be etched upon our hearts as the living law of love. Amen.