

Sermon: Thanksgiving Sunday, October 8, 2023 – Exodus 20: 1-20
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church– Rev Greg Wooley

Harvest festivals are widespread around the globe. My always-reliable friends at Wikipedia list no fewer than seventy harvest festivals, and it makes good sense: whether you get your fruits, grains and vegetables by harvesting them off your land or at the market, food is essential to human existence. And whether one's belief system gives credit to God for the cycle of the seasons or is simply grateful in a more general way for the growth of things to eat and the people most responsible for food production, pausing at the end of harvest to express gratitude is a good thing to do.

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And this Thanksgiving, I do give thanks for the gift of food: interesting, diverse foods that nourish us and bring enjoyment. Eating is good, sharing food with others is good. We give thanks for the food, for all people involved in food production, and pray for the health of the soil and water which are pressured by commercial food production and processing. I give thanks for gatherings at which food is shared, remembering how much of Jesus' ministry happened around bread broken and shared, and am thankful for events like the Canadian Foodgrains Bank beans & rice lunch we shared last Sunday after our worship service in Banff, which reminded us how widespread hunger is in this world and how we might participate in lessening and addressing the burden on those with meagre resources.

This Thanksgiving, I start with that thankfulness for food – the traditional harvest festival – and I feel drawn to go well beyond that, to an aspect of my life that needs to be lifted up with thankfulness now and then. That is, the role that a peace-based, inclusive faith in the God of all creation plays in our lives. I'm finding myself a bit introspective these days and one of the things I muse on is how different my life would be if its foundation was something other than faith in a God of love, if the gifts of wisdom, beloved community and thoughtful Christian engagement had had not been influences that shaped and claimed my life. The horrific events happening in Gaza and Israel this weekend gives me pause and reminds me that I cannot just give a blanket endorsement to "people of faith, however that faith is shaped" for religion can be the origin and fuel of hatred if we imagine God's relationship with us to be based on anything other than shalom – the peace, love and wellbeing that Creator God has infused into this earthly realm. So on this Thanksgiving Sunday, a time to give thanks for harvest, I also lift my praise to God, the source of dignity and peace, and the way that God's call to live a life focused on my neighbour's needs shapes the way my days unfold.

Today's scripture reading, traditionally known as the ten commandments, form the basis of God's covenant relationship with the Hebrew People, our forebears in faith. This is the basic behavioural contract with God and with one another but more than that, we have here the initial shaping of what matters to a person and a people in relationship with God.

Godly Play, an approach to children's faith development based on "wondering questions" which we used for a number of years here at Ralph Connor, has a memorable lesson called "Ten Best Ways." It presents the two stone tablets of the ten commandments like so:

LOVE GOD

1. Don't serve other Gods.
2. Make no idols to worship.
3. Be serious when you say my name.

4. Keep the Sabbath holy.

LOVE PEOPLE

5. Honour your mother and father.
6. Don't kill.
7. Don't break your marriage.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't lie.
10. *Don't even want* what others have.

While we've all heard the joke that the ten commandments are not multiple-choice, there's something about the first one and the last one that jump off the page for me today in a way that needs naming in a world of inequality.

What a great six-word piece of advice that tenth commandment offers: "don't even *want* what others have." We've already been told in the earlier commandments not to steal, not to kill, not to take someone else's spouse, not to cheat others by lying; here we're told to not even *want* what someone else has. Whether it is shaped by ambitiousness, or jealousy or envy, or self-centered arrogance, greed or envy or acquisitiveness can so easily takes over the life of a person, business or nation and – crossing over to the first commandment – that pursuit of stuff becomes the central motivator of life, it can become our God. If coveting what others have is number one in one's life, if unhealthy pride in possessions and a drive to always be seeking bigger and better guide the actions of one's days, it's not hard to see that this is a thirst that will never be fully quenched, a master that will never be adequately served.

John Allen, writing for the Political Theology Network, has what I found to be a very helpful view of the first commandment, the one that calls us to have no other Gods. He reminds me that not long before the ten commandments, the Hebrew People were an enslaved people in Egypt, and whatever else one might say about the Pharaoh, he was very skilled in controlling slaves: keep them busy, give them heavier and heavier burdens, make them too busy and tired and breathless to even imagine what it would like to be free. John Allen describes the Exodus – the liberation from that servitude and the subsequent long journey through the wilderness, as "the process of God's persistent effort to interrupt the habits of slavery. God institutes a day of rest when giving the instructions about gathering manna: never again will Israel become so breathless in their work that the spirit of new life cannot blow among them. God encourages Moses to share leadership, so that no one human leader will ever be regarded to be as indispensable as God. Then at Sinai, when God begins to utter the law, God reminds the people, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt" and instructs them: "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3). Far from being a demand of fidelity on the part of a jealous and insecure deity, this first commandment lays the foundation for the freedom that God desires for humanity. That is the freedom to live out their lives as ones formed in God's image. This is the critical re-orientation required in recovering from the psychological state of enslavement."

"The foundation of the divine law" he continues, "is that it liberates humanity from the responsibility to revere anything other than God. It is not hard to know the other [small-g] gods that demand the reverence and allegiance of people today. Our global capitalist system claims itself to be the 'invisible hand' which can right all social woes and advance human flourishing. The governments of nation-states demand the allegiance and obedience of their

citizens. ...[but] our identity as children of God, our responsibility to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, take priority over any of the [other] demands made on us.... This is the meaning of this prologue to God's law. If we pledge our allegiance to a false God—or to some worldly notion that parades as a cosmic absolute—we risk becoming like the breathless Hebrew People, unable to hear God's call toward liberation and redemption.”

Here, John Allen kind of names it all for me, giving words to the exact thing I want to thank God for on the occasion of this Thanksgiving festival. In all that I know about Jesus, and the liberating acts of the God of the Hebrew People – in the loving actions I have witnessed over decades of Church life – in the way that actions of justice and kindness undertaken by people of faith have made transformational change – in the provision of solid foundations for life, like Jesus's two-fold great commandment, and these ten commandments – I kept being called back, again and again, to what John Allen names as “our responsibility to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly, and to love our neighbours as ourselves” - and it's so important that nothing else in my life, nothing else in our gathered life as Church or community, can displace that. To be a person in covenant relationship with God, who is the creative force of life and love – to live as a community of faith in which all of us share that covenant – to have responsibilities to one another, to our neighbours, to this planet our world – these things make all the difference. To be freed from hatred, freed from rivalry, freed from envy and acquisitiveness, freed from anything that breaks the beauty of life, freed from anything that might lure me into treating it like God, allows me to recognize my life and your life and life itself as God's precious joys.

And so, let Thanksgiving be the order of the day: thanks for seedtime and harvest, thanks for food and those with whom we share it, and thanks for the way that God keeps calling us back to source: a call to live lives that reach beyond me and mine, lives oriented toward the needs and the hurts of others, lives that recognize the holy and undergirding desire for health and wholeness and life that can be freely lived by all of God's beloved children. For all of these things, we offer our lives to the God of life, in unbridled thanks and praise. Amen.

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