

The Hardest Commandment

One of the later theology courses which I took as a seminary student was on the theological understandings developed during the Reformation, especially those found in the writings of John Calvin. The professor who taught the course illustrated several things about the way we view the Torah and the commandments given in the covenant which have remained with me; the way they have been interpreted both by those of the Jewish tradition and those other Abrahamic faiths which grew out of them...both Islamic and Christian greatly influence the world around us. Professor Johnson asked us which of the ten commandments presented to the people gathered at Mount Sinai would be the hardest to obey for us...If you live in community with others you will find many of them are encoded into the laws of the society. Some of them may be relatively easy for most of us to check off any list drawn up as ones we have no trouble following as good law-abiding citizens. Of course, depending upon how strictly you define some things...you might be able to feel pretty good about your "righteousness" on that check-off list. He began listing the ones most of us feel pretty comfortable about our ability to be doing well...at least until it came to the added provisions of Jesus about including our thoughts being violations just valid as if we had done something about the feelings of anger, hostility, etc...The commandments about murder...killing...stealing...those come to mind for that grouping that most of us feel we can check off as obeying if we don't have to count those times of anger, or those feelings of prejudice or bias. Then there are those other ones about interpersonal relationships...adultery which get even stickier with the comments Jesus made about divorce and our cultural climate....but even that was where Dr. Johnson was going with his challenge. Then there is the one about bearing false witness...about telling falsehoods...how strictly is that to be taken...how often do we say we avoid being exactly truthful to avoid an unpleasant situation...and is that telling a falsehood or sometimes being kind, and does that commandment include any unkind gossip with which we have entertained ourselves or other? Walking through the covenant promises can be tricky in some ways depending upon how carefully you consider the intent about guiding human behavior away from doing harm to one another. But the one commandment Dr. Johnson was pointing us toward was illustrated in his mind by a child's toy he brought to class and sat on his desk...it was a model of a little red pick-up truck. He then told us that it represented for him the commandment that gave him the most trouble because he had always wanted one...not a toy, since he obviously had one, but a real red pick-up truck. He envied those who had them. And one of those commandments that he always seemed to break when he spotted a red pick-up truck was the one about coveting what your neighbor had. And there it is. Not high on the list as it is recorded, but present: You shall not covet what your neighbor has...and the list is itemized but ends up with anything that is your neighbors. And although listed near the bottom, you can see how the coveting could lead to other problems...like lying...or stealing...or

adultery...or even murder. The first set of commandments given as God was trying to form this gathered people into a community that could live together as one unit under the same rules where all knew and understood how to treat one another and all would prosper was design as that guidance. It set boundaries; there were no punishments set out as the gather people had promised to live according to the guidelines. Scripture and history tells us that was not what happened. Yet when Jesus was asked about the commandments he said again that they were still how those living in God's reign were to live. In fact, he said that all that was revealed in scripture could be summed up in two parts: Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. Because that was what most of those guidelines in the original covenant were about: giving guidance about how to live together where no one's actions would harm another. So we come to this time when God sends comes to dwell among us to demonstrate how to live according to the way that has been revealed. God comes embodied in flesh, to dwell among us as one of us. And in so doing, God as Jesus of Nazareth obediently lives out the hardest commandment for human beings—the loving of another as ones' self. At the beginning of the passage read from John's gospel account, the narrative tells us that Jesus is aware of the imminent betrayal, of the soon to come suffering and death, but that because he loved those he had chosen to continue his mission, he wished to spend this time gathered with them. The first portion of the passage describes Jesus' actions...he gets up from the table and begins to wash the feet of his disciples. That this action was done before eating was not uncommon in that time because almost all travel was by foot and many roads were not paved; footwear was often only sandals or non-existent. But this action was usually done by slaves, or the women; someone subservient...certainly not the leader of the group. Yet, this is what Jesus begins doing. And of course, Peter voices his objection about the situation. When Jesus responds: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Peter reverses course and seems to want a complete bath. After Jesus finishes this washing of all the disciples feet, and the passage makes it clear that Judas who will betray him is there, Jesus explains to them what he has done and why. "After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'" For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. In our reading today we skip over the meal which they are sharing, although here too it is noted that Judas also shares the meal. But after Judas leaves, we find that there is one more teaching...or at least another re-stating of the underlying teaching of all that God has been trying to convey when Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to be leaving them soon but has a "new commandment for them" and it is by this new commandment that he wishes those who follow him to be known. This commandment is found as verses 34-35: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one

another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” This is the hardest teaching for us to live into...especially if we remember that Jesus washed Judas’s feet, ate that last meal with him and then told him to go do quickly what it was he was going to do without a word of condemnation. Jesus during his time on earth constantly went and spent his time not only healing those who had been outcast because of illness, but eating with sinners. This was the constant complaint against him by the religious leaders of his day...and as we remember Jesus’ commandment that we are to love one another, we should also remember that we were told to follow his example in service...because if we truly do love our Lord and all those who bear the image of God within, then offering acts of service should follow. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have love you, you also should love one another...love one another more than self...indeed, that is the basis of all the commandments and when put like that...it is the hardest of all. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.