

Jubilee Sunday Sermon Notes

March 20, 2006,

Third Sunday in Lent, Year B

Texts (Revised Common Lectionary) Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Midway through the season of Lent, the lectionary texts often seem to have little relation to one another. However, seen from the perspective of issues related to the Jubilee and global economic justice, both the Hebrew scripture and the Gospel are related in their messages about idolatry and liberation, and it will be on those two passages that we will concentrate.

Exodus 20:1-17

In this deeply polarized age, a sermon on the Ten Commandments probably should begin by at least acknowledging the conflict over Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore's attempts to have them displayed in the rotunda of the state Supreme Court building. To a growing number of very sincere people (mainly white, Protestant, evangelicals), the commandments have become an object of devotion beyond their specific content. We can't settle that debate. The Decalogue was here before this discussion and will surely outlive it.

There is a helpful distinction to be drawn between the first four commandments, which deal with our relationship with God, and the last six, which deal with our relationship with one another. For time and space reasons, we will be concerned here mainly with the first group and suggest that you consider for your sermons the two themes of idolatry and Sabbath. Idolatry is important because it is the over arching theme of the first three commandments (named specifically in the second) and Sabbath is important because it is integral to the later Jubilee laws. (If you miss talking about the second six, you will get another chance next year when the Decalogue rolls around again as Proper 22, Ordinary Time 27, year A).

Idolatry

The Anglican and Reformed traditions consider vv. 3-6 to be two commandments while the Lutheran and Roman traditions consider them to be one. The existence of that disagreement illustrates that in reality at least vv 1-6, and probably v. 7 (taking Yahweh's name in vain) are closely related and all point to that larger human ailment, idolatry. They are prohibitions on anything that would get in the way of absolute trust in, and loyalty to, God. The first prohibition is of other gods, the second, the creation of idols as gods, and the third, the misuse of the name of God.

It is often argued that the first commandment acknowledges the existence of other gods, and that's true, but it misses the point. The question of the command is not whether ancient Israel did or did not accept the existence of other gods (they did) but where one puts one's loyalty. If we worship something (anything) other than God, we have in fact *created* other gods. We believe in other "gods" when we worship the creation rather than the creator. When we place our faith—as trust and loyalty—in something other than the God behind all that is, that in fact becomes another God. Luther recognized this in his Larger Catechism, which includes a comment on this commandment:

What does it mean to have a god, or what is God? Trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol...for the two,

faith and God, hold close together. Whatever then they heart clings to...and relies upon, this is properly thy God."¹

This is relevant to Jubilee Sunday because there are political and financial leaders who give every appearance of offering their ultimate trust in, and loyalty to, a particular human-created model of economic globalization. There are a number of models of how international finance and development could work, but one reigns supreme and it is supported by the international wealthy classes with a near-religious sense of worship and devotion. They trust it to save us, they follow rituals to preserve it, and they are intensely loyal in promoting of it. Even their language occasionally resembles a believer's dedication. Consider this from an article on globalization basics in *Business Week*, November, 2000: "Free trade means growth. Free trade means growth. Free trade means growth. Just say it 50 more times and all doubts will melt away"²

Susan George, has described globalization this way, "[F]rom a small, unpopular sect with virtually no influence, neoliberalism (read "globalization") has become *the major world religion* with its dogmatic doctrine, its priesthood, its law-giving institutions and perhaps most important of all, its hell for heathen and sinners who dare to contest the revealed truth. Oscar LaFontaine, the ex-German Finance Minister, was consigned to that hell because he dared to propose higher taxes on corporations and tax cuts for ordinary and less well-off families."³

Or this from Bill Moyers, February 1, 2002, on the PBS television show, "Now." In an exchange with social critic, Benjamin Barber, he said:

[F]or years now the ruling ideology, the ruling religion of America has been the free market. Its god is profit. Its heaven is the corporate board room. Its hell is regulation. Its Bible is the *Wall Street Journal*. Its choir of angels is the corporate media. You've got a religion in this country of free markets that is established in the political culture as well.

Their devotion to the "free" market system touches the work of Jubilee Congregations because the US, the World Bank, the IMF, the Paris Club and others force poor countries of the world to obey the rules of their religion as a precondition for receiving some level of debt cancellation.

As many of us know, the harsh conditions imposed upon countries in the "Highly Indebted Poor Country" (HIPC) initiative, as a requirement for (potential) debt relief, often drive them deeper into poverty before the relief comes. The IMF—

¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, LC, I, 1-3, p. 386.

² "How Free Trade Prompts Growth: A Primer," *New York Times* (December 15, 1993), p. A1.

³ Susan George, "A Short History of Neoliberalism," *Global Finance*, Walden Bellow, Nicola Bullard, and Kamel Malhotra eds. (New York: Zed Books, 2000), p. 29 (Italics added).

and occasionally the others—has been accused of having a “cookie cutter” approach to solving all of the economic ills of the third world. It is a blind faith in a policy that has often failed, but—as with any idolatry—it is intensely difficult for them to change course because their faith in the god of free markets will not let them. One of the basic tenets of worshiping an idol is that one has grave difficulty accepting that there is truth outside of the realm of the doctrine of the faith.

But there is truth outside of free market religion. The Center for Economic and Policy Research studied World Bank numbers on global economic health and found that from 1980 to 2000—years of great growth in economic globalization—the countries who complied with free market dogma tended to stagnate or decline, and those who avoided it tended to grow. Share these summary points with your congregation:

- “In Latin America and the Caribbean, the gross domestic product grew by 75 percent per person from 1960 to 1980, but it grew by only 7 percent per person from 1980 to 2000....
- The GDP in sub-Saharan Africa grew by about 34 percent per person from 1960 to 1980, but from 1980 to 2000, it actually fell by about 15 percent....⁴
- The per person output among all countries measured grew by an average of 83 percent from 1960 to 1980 but from 1980-2000, the average growth of output per person was 33 percent.
- Even in those areas where growth actually went up, most were still better before the rise of economic and corporate globalization than afterward. For example, Hong Kong grew at 6.9 percent in the eighties, and only 5.6 percent in the nineties. Korea grew at 9.4 percent in the eighties and 7.2 in the nineties. Indonesia grew at 7.6 percent in the eighties, and 6.1 percent in the nineties. And these numbers are through the first half of the nineties. As you may know, the east Asian countries cratered in 1997, with one of the deepest depressions of the twentieth century. These measurements are all *before* that collapse. They all would have registered negative growth had I measured up to, say the year 2000.⁵

Occasionally financial spokespersons will admit that there are flaws in the doctrine, but they usually follow by saying that the present suffering is the prerequisite for eventual take off of the developing economy. Even journalist Thomas Friedman, one of the most sunny proponents of the wonders of economic globalization, acknowledges that in its early stages it can cause disruptions and dislocations.⁶ We might call this an “Economic Eschatology.” That is, it may cause great suffering and death right now, but trust us and in the sweet by and by your children or grand children will have a better life. To this people of faith might ask, how moral it is to force a country into deeper the poverty and suffering just so that the next generation might finally benefit? Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize winning economist, former World Bank chief economist, and now a critic of the present model of globaliza-

tion, has said that short term budget cuts can cause collateral harm for far longer than many economists admit. For example, when a country cuts spending for education (in order to save money to pay on its external debt) it takes from two to three generations to build back an educated citizenry.

Sabbath

So, what is the appropriate response from people of faith? There are a number of sources, but on this Sunday we turn to the Fourth Commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” The concept of Sabbath is so old that scholars do not agree on where it came from, except that maybe God told the Jews to have one. Other countries had days of rest, such as market days, cultic days, or trade days, but there is nothing in the ancient world to parallel a nation simply flattening the calendar and saying that every seven days (or seven years) there will be a time of rest. But, of course, their answer was that God told them to do it.⁷

The word *sabbath* is from the Hebrew *shabbat*, meaning “to cease and desist.” The primary meaning is that of cessation from all work. It means more than resting on Sunday (which few of us do anyway). At a deeper level it means to cease doing those things which alienate you from being the person God created you to be: rest from activities that damage what God intended in your creation. When the Hebrews rested on the Sabbath, they were supposed to think of the Garden of Eden and Palestine before the Monarchy, when everyone was equal, there were no slaves, there was no indebtedness. Later, with Deuteronomy, the Sabbath day was projected into a Sabbath *year*, and Israelites were to free their slaves and let their land rest, and still later with Leviticus 25, after seven sabbath years plus one, they were to have a Jubilee in which slaves, debts, land, and the order of creation was to be returned to the way that God had intended it.

In Deuteronomy’s version of the Decalogue (5:12-15), this is made even more explicit. There, the Deuteronomist adds that the reason for Sabbath is that “you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” The true measure of “Keeping the Sabbath,” then, would be first, to work to bring the world back to the egalitarian, humane, balanced world that God intended, and second, to work for the release of those who are impoverished and enslaved by crippling economic forces that are beyond their control. Perhaps on this Sunday, the authentic manner for Christians and other people of faith to celebrate the Sabbath, would be to sign postcards and letters and send them to the US Treasury and Congress.

⁴ Mark Weisbrot, “The Mirage of Progress, *The American Prospect*, Special Supplement, Winter, 2002, p. A 10.

⁵ Mark Weisbrot, Dean Baker, Egor Kraev, and Judy Chen, *The Scorecard on Globalization 1980-2000: Twenty Years of Diminished Progress* (Washington: Center For Economic and Policy Research, 2000), pp. 2-3.

⁶ In his famous *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Anchor Books, pb. 2000), he devotes one chapter to what he calls the “Backlash” against the obvious values of globalization. And then goes on to address how we who know of globalization’s values need to listen to the complainers or else someday they may be strong enough to “destabilize” it’s inevitable march forward (p. 329).

⁷ Walter Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 79-92.