

Catechesis  
Reading from the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 6:1-9  
Reading from the New Testament: Acts 5: 27-29, 33-42

The world premiere of the Ten Commandments was quite a production. At Horeb, the mountain was on fire, surrounded by thick darkness, a massive storm cloud hovering over the landscape. And then the voice, unlike any voice the people had ever heard. James Cameron couldn't produce it, nor could Spielberg or George Lucas. Even if James Earl Jones had auditioned for the part, he would have been sent home without a contract. This was the voice of the Lord! A voice both irresistible and terrifying at the same time. It is such that you cannot ignore it, but it is so overwhelming, so powerful that you'd rather read about it than hear it live. You feel like the spectacle on the mountain warrants one of those warnings that guard our way through this world: Danger! High Voltage! Do not step beyond the yellow line! Do not attempt to climb in the animal enclosure! These plates are very hot!

It's not that the people wanted to ignore the voice. Fearing for their lives, they want someone else to go in and take notes for them. So, the people send a committee to speak to Moses: "Look, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out

of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live. So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? Go near, you yourself, and hear all that the Lord our God will say. Then tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will listen and do it."

Have you seen the Geico commercial where the guy climbs into the attic of the house he might purchase? The attic, filled with spooky looking mannequin parts evokes a scene from one of the horror movies that stream ad nauseum in the weeks before Halloween. The guy immediately starts backing up, saying only, "Uh, Uh ... Nope!" Moses, you go on up there, and we'll stay back here in the bomb shelter.

So, Moses, standing between God and the people, did what the Lord asked him to do, what the people needed him to do, and what they were not yet equipped to do. He taught. Any biography or memoir or interview will include an accounting of the people who influenced the subject's life - a parent, a teacher, a mentor - someone who passed on

information, counsel, lessons, wisdom, knowledge - influence passed on either formally, informally, pedagogically, or accidentally. The lessons may have come by intention, or possibly without the giver or recipient even realizing it at the time. Did you know that Colin Powell, four-star general, Secretary of State, was deeply influenced by a man for whom he worked at Sickser's toy and baby furniture store in the Bronx? There, he learned the essential discipline of maintaining a cool, sound head. His boss spoke Yiddish like many of the customers, and taught him the phrase *Gesund dein kepple*, "Keep a healthy head". That seemed a good principle to live by.

Powell may have been just a C-student, but he listened, and he learned on the job, from his father, in the neighborhood, and on the Army base. He even codified these lessons into what became known as his 13 rules of leadership: "Don't take counsel of your fears;" "Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier;" and so forth. (*The Economist*) He watched. He listened. He learned. He practiced. He remembered. He taught.

In a significant way, we are the product of the lessons we have assimilated from those we observed along the way, and the next generation will be formed by both by the healthy and harmful lessons

we pass on. Maybe, it would be a good idea for us to spend less time worrying about what tech companies are surreptitiously listening in on our conversations and more time worrying about what the children of the world are learning from us, because **they are** learning from us. What are we teaching them? Do we even know what we should be passing on to them?

With the Law of God in hand, having stood between the powerful voice of God and a skittish student body with a short attention span, Moses speaks, "Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy ... Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you."

**So that it may go well for you...** Have you ever had something significant that you wanted to impart to someone because you knew it would be for their benefit, health, safety, and well-being? This involves no passive aggressive effort to manipulate or control. This is not some self-righteous demagoguery from an insufferable know-it-all. This isn't you trying to draw the impressionable prey into the web of your

dysfunction. No, I'm talking about an actual nugget of beneficial knowledge that is essential if it is to go well for them. You know: buckle your seat belt; treat the customer with courtesy; look to your right first before crossing the street in London; get the vaccine; if you want to be rich, keep your wants few; don't punch someone on a plane; eat your vegetables; every hour spent in bitterness is an hour you can't get back; humankind, be both. Important lessons you want them to know so that it may go well with them.

"Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you." Every teacher, and believe me, every preacher is thoroughly experienced in looking out at the faces gathered before them and seeing a number of eyes staring back at them with that spirit crushing look of rebuke: *I'm not buying what you are selling, and I don't even know what it is!* How do you break through that? Teachers have been known to dress in costumes, jump up on their desks, and read the scientific method or the Constitution like a rap artist. Preachers bring in videos, smoke machines, and t-shirt cannons in a desperate attempt to engage the people. They're trying... They're trying... Sometimes it's more fluff than substance; more performative than edifying. Sometimes

it is hackneyed and over the top. Sometimes you think they'd be better off trying Quakerism, but often, even their misguided efforts are just an attempt to drill through the wall of apathy. It is easier to argue with the atheist than it is to engage the indifferent. Sometimes, it would be tempting to sing, *Surely, the presence of the Lord is in this place ... well ... except for there ... there ... and over there.* The teacher, the preacher, they know that they have words, concepts, tools that their gathered skeptics need to embrace in order that it may go well for them, and if it risks appearing the fool, so be it. What did Paul say? "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom."

You can hear a certain wistfulness in the voice of the Lord when the Lord speaks to Moses, "If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever!" If only...

With that, Moses is all the more intent on impressing upon the people the urgency of covenant faith and life under the Lordship of God. He stands before the people and says, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." This is known as

the Shema, the Hebrew word for *hear*, and it conveys the most essential of truths. Look at the two primary verbs of the Shema: Hear (or listen) and love. Listen and love. And what would the corollaries of these two verbs be? Learn and share (or teach).

The commentary Moses provides here is the framework for the life of faith. "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise..."

It is an image that calls for careful attention and intention when we think about what are teaching others and what others are observing and learning in our witness. People are watching, observing, and learning. What is it that we are communicating? When we fail to ponder this question thoughtfully, and with depth, the consequences are ugly.

An article from *The Atlantic* this week probed the growing rift in Christian witness here in America. A number of high-profile leaders, self-identified evangelicals, are leaving or being forced out of the evangelical movement, and the methods being utilized are eerily

reminiscent of the hatreds, resentments, vilifications, put-downs, and insults of the political world, particularly over the last five years, and that is not a coincidence. Peter Wehner writes, "When the Christian faith is politicized, churches become repositories not of grace but of grievances, places where tribal identities are reinforced, where fears are nurtured, and where aggression and nastiness are sacralized. The result is not only wounding the nation; it's having a devastating impact on the Christian faith." Historian George Marsden says that political loyalties can sometimes be so strong that they create a religiouslike faith that overrides or even transforms a more traditional religious faith."

Scott Dudley, a Presbyterian pastor in suburban Seattle offered a powerful observation. He said he's heard of many congregants leaving their church because it didn't match their politics but has never once heard of someone changing their politics because it didn't match their church's teaching. He often tells his congregation that if the Bible doesn't challenge your politics at least occasionally, you're not really paying attention to the Hebrew scriptures or the New Testament. Wehner says, "The reality, however, is that a lot of people, especially in

this era, will leave a church if their political views are ever challenged, even around the edges."

A book publisher observed that this results from a failure of catechesis, a word that refers to the religious education that equips one with an understanding and a vocabulary about their faith so that they may both claim it and articulate it. He sings a tune we've been singing around here for as long as I can remember. We have you here for what? Maybe two hours a month? So, if you want to grow as a disciple, or nurture your children in faith, live up to your baptismal promises, and offer a reflection of Christ in this angry world, we'll get you the resources (Rebecca, Whitney, and Lindsey are working tirelessly and creatively to do just that), but you are going to have to do something with it.

We are what we consume. Alan Jacobs of Baylor University points out that culture catechizes. "Culture teaches us what matters and what views we should take about what matters. Our current political culture," Jacobs argues, "has multiple technologies and platforms for catechizing—television, radio, Facebook, Twitter, and podcasts among them. People who want to be connected to their political tribe—the

people they think are like them, the people they think are on their side—subject themselves to its catechesis all day long, every single day, hour after hour after hour ... People come to believe what they are most thoroughly and intensively catechized to believe, and that catechesis comes not from the churches but from the media they consume, or rather the media that consume them ... “What all those media want is engagement, and engagement is most reliably driven by anger and hatred,” Jacobs argued. “They make bank when we hate each other.”

(Peter Wehner, *The Atlantic*) Without a proper grounding in our core concepts of grace and love, you can even be convinced that your anger and hate are necessary to your defense of Jesus.

That's not who we are. That has never been who we have been meant to be. Dudley points out "that the early Christians transformed the Roman empire not by demanding but by loving." But he also points out that when Christians gained power through Constantine, we became more concerned about losing power than serving Jesus, and thus evolved into an angry, persecuting church.

Well, SMPC is here to resist that. We are here to be a place where welcome is the priority, love is a verb, and grace is an identity; a place

where our questions are welcomed and explored, believing that the Spirit is here teaching us as we wrestle with the big questions, the tough questions. Here we learn so that we may love, and we love so that grace may abound.

Moses pleaded, "Listen ... and love ... with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." Jesus reaffirmed that and added to it. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Those early apostles of Christ understood that, and they would not let mockery, imprisonment, or threat keep them from the task of teaching others of Christ's self-giving love. Hate was not going to own them. To those who were willing to threaten and abuse them in an attempt to silence them, they said, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." And witnessing their commitment to the gospel of love, one of their accusers said, "if this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God."

And guess what, we're still here ... listening ... learning ... loving.  
Are you with us? Together, let us stand against the hate ... listening ...  
learning ... loving ... so that it may go well for all. Amen.