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Propers 4 (Pentecost 2) Series B 2018

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (Of course these verses on the Sabbath Command are embedded in the whole Ten Commandments. I have included the whole passage for you here.)

Moses summoned all Israel and said:

Hear, Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. ² The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. ³ It was not with our ancestors^[a] that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. ⁴ The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. ⁵ (At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said:

⁶ *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

⁷ *“You shall have no other gods before^[b] me.*

⁸ *“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁹ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ¹⁰ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

¹¹ *“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*

¹² *“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you.*

¹³ *Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. ¹⁵ Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.*

¹⁶ *“Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you.*

¹⁷ *“You shall not murder.*

¹⁸ *“You shall not commit adultery.*

¹⁹ *“You shall not steal.*

²⁰ *“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*

²¹ “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor’s house or land, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

²² These are the commandments the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.

There is a good reason for Deuteronomy’s name – it is the second telling of the Law – you might want to turn to Exodus 20 to get the first telling of these commandments. We get this excised section of the Ten Commandments because Jesus will confront Pharisees over the keeping of this command in the Gospel reading today.

The back-story here is that Moses, soon to die after a forty-year retirement career in the prophet and slave-liberation professions, is summing things up prior to his death on Mount Nebo. He is recapitulating the Torah for the people in a series of sermons. In one of the few word for word retellings, he simply quotes the Ten Commandments for us again. That fact should give us pause. He does very little verbatim reuse of Genesis-Numbers material. But he does so here. Time to sit up and pay attention.

Recently an evangelical, non-denominational pastor of a very large church in Atlanta suggested that Christians need to “unhitch” their faith from the Old Testament, even suggesting that the Ten Commandments should not be obligatory. To be fair he was preaching about Acts 15 which could be interpreted as not laying circumcision and other OT rules on the gentile community. That said, his comments have caused a bit of a kerfuffle. You can read his clarification of the sermon here: <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2018/may/i-never-suggested-we-un-hitch-andy-stanley-walks-back-on-controversial-sermon>

You can also read a thoughtful reaction to his comments here: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/05/andy-stanleys-modern-marcionism> Wesley Hill suggests in this article that in fact Stanley’s comments, however, he spins them, are reflecting a de facto Marcionism which infects particularly protestant Christianity. The fact is, when I survey my Christian students. They almost never hear sermons on the Old Testament. Marcion wanted to jettison the OT in the second century. We have not gotten rid of it, but we almost never go there. That’s what we mean by de facto Marcionism.

I bring this up because it is not just academic concern. We need to be paying attention to the OT because without it, our reading of the NT will be distorted and Christ will be obscured in our preaching.

I can think of no better commentary on the Ten Commandments than Luther’s Small and Large Catechism. Luther thought the Ten Commandments to be critically important for the Christian and with good reason. The Commandments crush the one who hears/reads them and takes them to heart. That person is ready for the Gospel. Without the Commandments the good news could not really be good.

Here is Luther on the third commandment:

But to grasp a Christian meaning for the simple as to what God requires in this commandment, note that we keep holy days not for the sake of intelligent and learned Christians (for they have no need of it [holy days]), but first of all for bodily causes and necessities, which nature teaches and requires; for the common people, man-servants and maid-servants, who have been attending to their work and trade the whole week, that for a day they may retire in order to rest and be refreshed.

Secondly, and most especially, that on such day of rest (since we can get no other opportunity) freedom and time be taken to attend divine service, so that we come together to hear and treat of God's Word, and then to praise God, to sing and pray.

However, this, I say, is not so restricted to any time, as with the Jews, that it must be just on this or that day; for in itself no one day is better than another; but this should indeed be done daily; however, since the masses cannot give such attendance, there must be at least one day in the week set apart. But since from of old Sunday [the Lord's Day] has been appointed for this purpose, we also should continue the same, in order that everything be done in harmonious order, and no one create disorder by unnecessary innovation. (Large Catechism, 83-85)

Luther distills out several helpful things to say about the Sabbath here. First of all, it is not the keeping of the Sabbath that makes us Christians –rather the Sabbath command is given for the sake of people. It both provided rest and it afforded a time to hear the Word, praise, pray, and sing. Just before this he also says that it gives us a chance to be about the life of good works to which we are called, taking care of the little and least in our community.

But Luther also resists rigidity here. There is a need to rest and to listen, but this need not take place at a specific time. It just needs to take place. I think too often we fail to realize that abusing our bodies by over work and failure to get enough sleep is actually a 3rd commandment problem. God commands rest. The Deuteronomy version we have above associates that with the rescue from slavery in Egypt. God was forcing them to stop work because that way they owned their freedom. But as Paul notes in Galatians and Romans, we can easily re-enslave ourselves and frequently do enslave ourselves to relentless taskmasters who drive us to the point of exhaustion. This is a Third Commandment problem. Your doctor might say that lack of sleep is a health problem and he is right. But it is also a God problem.

Satan's goal in keeping us so busy is to keep us from listening to God and he just likes misery by his very nature. If he can make us miserable by working too hard and thereby keep us so frenetic that we cannot hear the gentle voice of the Holy Spirit, it is a double win for him. And so God commands us to rest. He loves our bodies which need it. He has something precious and good to say to us which needs to be heard and concentrated upon to the exclusion of everything else. What is more, as Luther notes elsewhere, the cause of our ceaseless striving is also a First Commandment failure as well. We imagine that we will through such work support and save

ourselves. It takes trust and faith to rest. Failure to rest is also often because we do not really trust that God will take care of us.

There are many things which keep people from worship in this time. Our business tend to operate on a 24/7 schedule. But this should not surprise us. The early church was born into a time which knew nothing of a day off every week. That did not happen for several hundred years. The pagan Roman Empire also worked seven days a week. Early Christians went to services very early in the morning because they often had work that day. It is easy for us complain about attendance and point to soccer schedules and this busy-ness of modern life. But I am not sure I would go there. The issue is not the schedule. If we offered a service at a time which the soccer kids could attend, would they? I think I would be willing to hold the service, say Thursday or Sunday evening. I think I would find myself standing in the nave alone.

The great hymn “Salvation Unto Us Has Come” notes that there is a “false, misleading dream” which is possible from these Commandments. The self-deluded reader can imagine that he or she could thereby become a person pleasing to God. They hold out that carrot, always right in front of us. The very idea of a commandments suggests that keeping it puts one into the right column in God’s book. But the Lord destroys this dream in the Sermon on the Mount. There the Commandments are recast with the express purpose of destroying such dreams. The keeper of the Commandments is not found in the one who avoids killing his neighbor. The man who hates his neighbor is guilty of murder. The one who lusts after another man or woman is an adulterer.

Jesus is also dealing with this false and misleading dream in the Gospel reading. We will take that up when we get there.

Psalm 81:1-10

¹ Sing for joy to God our strength;
shout aloud to the God of Jacob!

² Begin the music, strike the timbrel,
play the melodious harp and lyre.

³ Sound the ram’s horn at the New Moon,
and when the moon is full, on the day of our festival;

⁴ this is a decree for Israel,
an ordinance of the God of Jacob.

⁵ When God went out against Egypt,
he established it as a statute for Joseph.

I heard an unknown voice say:

⁶ “I removed the burden from their shoulders;
their hands were set free from the basket.

⁷ In your distress you called and I rescued you,
I answered you out of a thundercloud;
I tested you at the waters of Meribah. ^[c]

⁸ Hear me, my people, and I will warn you—
if you would only listen to me, Israel!
⁹ You shall have no foreign god among you;
you shall not worship any god other than me.
¹⁰ I am the LORD your God,
who brought you up out of Egypt.
Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.

¹¹ *“But my people would not listen to me;
Israel would not submit to me.*

¹² *So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts
to follow their own devices.*

¹³ *“If my people would only listen to me,
if Israel would only follow my ways,*

¹⁴ *how quickly I would subdue their enemies
and turn my hand against their foes!*

¹⁵ *Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him,
and their punishment would last forever.*

¹⁶ *But you would be fed with the finest of wheat;
with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”*

The Psalm is a classic case for not chopping up the readings to make them fit our sensibilities for worship. The complication to this psalm brought in by vss. 11 and 12 is important. The fact is that the Psalmist notes that they are not keeping the commandments and thus God has set his face against them (no benediction!)

Vss. 13-16 is the promise for them. Listen – follow and God will come to your aid. Fed with the finest wheat they will drink not water from the rock as the Israelites did, but honey. If you are thinking of preaching the OT text, this could be a very good sermon outline in this psalm.

II Corinthians 4:5-12

¹ *Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.*

⁷ *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in*

our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

The paraments return to green this week, a deliberate reference to the emerald rainbow around the throne of God in Revelation 4. The Lamb who looks like he has been slain is in our midst. The green attests to it.

The green also means that we resume our semi-continuous reading of Paul's second Epistle to the Corinthians. If Easter would have been earlier, we would have gotten a little more of this important book and the preacher who is attracted to this text will want to take a running start at this by reading the first chapters carefully.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is the final element of a series of correspondence between Paul and this congregation. It is necessary to put this into context – here is the reconstruction of this which makes the most sense to me.

- 1. Sometime early in the third missionary journey of Paul (ca. 53 AD) Paul receives some communication, probably a letter, from the Christian community in Corinth, the city in which he had spent 18 months during the second missionary journey (ca. 49-51 AD).*
- 2. Paul responds to this communication with a letter which is lost to us, but he mentions it in I Cor. 5:9.*
- 3. This first letter apparently does not resolve the problem and a delegation from Cloe's household then meets with him. They may also be bearing another letter from them. Paul's reference to their letter may refer to the earlier letter or may refer to a new letter.*
- 4. Paul responds to the delegation from Cloe's house with another letter, I Corinthians, which he sends with Timothy, likely from Ephesus.*
- 5. I Corinthians is a failure – the letter is not successful in resolving the many issues which plague the community in Corinth: factionalism, gross immorality, problematic worship, etc.*
- 6. Timothy reports back to Paul and Paul makes a personal visit to Corinth which he describes as a "painful" visit (II Cor. 2:1). From later descriptions it appears that Paul is opposed and rejected in the course of this visit.*
- 7. Paul had promised a second visit, but instead pens yet another letter which he calls a "harsh" letter (II Cor. 7:8-12). He posts the letter with Titus. This letter is successful and Titus returns to find Paul and deliver good news (II Corinthians 2:12-17).*
- 8. In response to this – Paul pens a letter of reconciliation to the Corinthians (II Corinthians) which is likely also delivered by Titus.*

At this point the correspondence breaks off. I should also say that there are other reconstructions of the data. This can get rather speculative and if you are reading around in commentaries, be aware that there are some very odd ideas about this letter.

When we turn our attention to the contents of the pericope, we hear Paul carefully writing in the fragile situation of a relationship that is healing but still a little raw and tender. Hard words have been spoken. Paul has been accused of being fickle in not making the second visit he had

promised them. You can see him defending himself against that charge in the first verses which are not included here. He is being careful lest he come across as arrogant or domineering. So he speaks of this ministry of reconciliation but is very careful to say that he is not a perfect fellow. He is a humble clay jar into which a great treasure has been poured, a treasure he can pour out for them. He speaks of this resilience he has, but does so in a way which admits that he gets stomped on and beaten, but the Christ who dwells in him gives him strength. Paul is not the hero here – Jesus is very much the hero. Paul’s body is a vessel for the demonstration of Christ’s death and Christ’s life. Don’t look at Paul, but look through him to the Jesus who dwells therein. When Paul suffers it is so that Jesus can be seen better.

This last element is likely dealing with the guilt that the Corinthians are feeling. It appears from elsewhere in the letter that Paul’s visit to them went very badly. They said some pretty hard things to him. His feelings were hurt. It is hard to imagine that someone can just let that sort of a thing go. But Paul here says that even when they were being mean and cruel to him, when they ridiculed and hurt him, Jesus kept him strong and what is more, his suffering helped people see Jesus more clearly. With these two truths Paul seems to be setting aside their guilt for them. Paul is not looking to the hurt, he is looking to the Jesus who turned the suffering into something else. If this sounds familiar, it is essentially what Joseph says to his brothers in the final chapters of Genesis.

This last part of the reading has some very interesting implications for the preacher to consider. Paul’s recasting of suffering runs directly against the modern day culture which has identified pain and suffering as the greatest evil and to be avoided at all costs, including, in many states, the right to suicide. Paul sees his own suffering as violence against a clay jar which only serves to reveal the treasure that is within. It is God’s power which is revealed in Paul’s weakness and helplessness. Our people have likely been shaped by that culture which sees pain and suffering only as evil. This will be shocking for them and perhaps hard to digest, but it prepares them to face their own suffering in a new way. Paul’s description of himself as resilient and in a strange way indestructible despite the beating he endures looks pretty appealing. You may want to read the stories of Paul’s travels to see a little of what he means. One day he was stoned and left for dead. Everyone thought he was dead, but when they gathered around his body, he popped up and went back into town to preach some more (Acts 14:19-20.) That could be pretty attractive.

Mark 2:23-28, (3:1-6)

²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

²⁵ He answered, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”

²⁷ Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

¹Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. ² Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

⁴ Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

⁵ He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Mark does not have a great number of discourses like Matthew’s five sermons or Luke’s extended discourses. But much of that material is included in these exchanges Jesus has with people as he rushes about and engages in the urgent ministry to which he has been sent. Jesus today confronts the Pharisees about the Sabbath.

As we noted under the OT reading, the commandments have a built in pitfall. We could imagine that by keeping them we are somehow the people please to God. We know God loves us because we are the folks who go to Church on Sunday. One might think about this as you sit in church, gazing past the preacher through the window behind him and notice all the cars streaming by on the road leading to the golf course, the fishing hole, or the stadium. But there is more than one way to break this commandment, isn’t there? Daydreaming about being in the boat on the lake instead of in the pew where your rear is getting sore because the sermon is long is probably just as absent as the guy with his line in the water. Perhaps he is just more honest about it.

That spiritual pride, however, is always close at hand. It was close for the Pharisees of the first century and it is close for the woman or man (including the preacher!) who is in church on this Sunday. We would love for God to notice our sacrifice of time and to respond, just a little. Even if he just shakes his head at those guys and we get a briefest hint of a smile. We are good Lutherans and know we cannot earn our way to heaven, but we like to imagine that God smiles when we trudge up the steps to worship on a beautiful Sunday morning.

The Pharisees were so sure that God was watching that they turned the keeping of the Sabbath into a rigid and complex set of rules about what was and was not permitted on the Sabbath. To this day, Sabbath elevators in Israel will stop on every floor of a hotel so that observant Jewish guests will not break this commandment by pressing a button for the right floor.

We of course find such rigor and rules to be alien nonsense. But has not our enemy simply tempted us another way, into a spiritual pride which disdains the “non-attending” person. We are jealous of their offerings which are not in the plate and we are sure they have made a terrible mistake by not coming to church, a mistake which we have avoided.

But Jesus has no patience for this sort of thing. The Sabbath is for people, not the other way around. Hungry disciples and hurting people are his focus, not the rules kept to their detriment. God does not love me one iota more than he loves the foul-mouthed fisherman who is sitting in his boat on the local reservoir this Sunday. Here the “Simul Justus et Peccator” is helpful. I am always both. On my best day, when I am singing in the choir, contributing to the plate, praying with fervor and devotion I am always

still 100% that sinner in need to Christ. On my worst day, the day when I have forgotten about Christ and am living as if he never was, I am still the person for whom he died – 100%.

Jesus just won't let us make the distinctions we want to make. He is the Lord of the Sabbath and the Lord of me. He wrote these rules and gets to define their purpose, not me and they were not given to be my mechanism of judgment on anyone. They are God's rules and any judging belongs to him. Moses would have had the Israelites keep the Sabbath to remember that they were free. I am called to worship to own and proclaim the freedom and life which Christ won for me in his death and resurrection. I am called to proclaim that gift to the church-skipping skipper of that bass-boat. Everything I say and even think about that fellow needs to start from that love, not judgment.

The Pharisees did not like that. They won't like it today either. They sought to kill Jesus because they saw him overturning their carefully constructed world. They were right. His teaching would have done and did in fact do just that. Their plot against him played right into his plans. Mark wants you to know that and to realize that the suffering which afflicts God's people because they are faithful to Christ and His Kingdom is to be expected and even embraced. That is one of the major themes of this whole Gospel and the reader of a pericope like this needs to keep it in mind.

Law and Gospel

1. I am God's creature. He sets the rules and demands my obedience. But I cannot obey even the wonderful command to take a break. Left to my own devices I will either fall off the horse into the ditch of sloth or I will slide off the other side and work myself to death. I just cannot seem to get this life right. I hate God's commandments for they show me my sin and failure. But I also love the commandments. They show me Jesus, Jesus who sees the Sabbath for what it is, a gift to me and a loving commandment which is designed to help me be more human and less a slave either to my appetites or my insecurity and greed. Jesus keeps the Sabbath command for me and in so doing bestows his righteousness on me and enables me to keep the Sabbath with him.
2. As I sit here in church today I am pretty sure that I am keeping the Sabbath and those cars I hear driving past the church out there are not likely Presbyterians and Methodists heading off their respective late services. They are skipping worship, if they even are aware that worship exists. My sinful heart would really like God to notice this fact. I am here – they are not. I would love it if he would pat me on the head and say, "Well done!" But when I open my eyes, I find Jesus walking through the grainfields with the Sabbath breakers, chomping on the barley with them. He is calling the tax collectors and Sunday morning leisure seekers to himself and declaring his love for them. My old sinner is appalled, but then he turns to me and says he loves judgmental prigs too.
3. I really want to be a successful Christian. If I am honest about it, I think I would like to shoot for a halo-wearing saint status, just like those renaissance paintings have. I trick myself into thinking that I could navigate this minefield of sin and weakness. I am stronger than they were. I would persevere. But the truth is that Satan really doesn't have to work that hard on me. I cave pretty quickly. But now something gets revealed to us. Jesus on the cross has embraced my own failures. Not that he likes them, but that he has turned them into something else. Now they have become occasions when God's powerful love is revealed in us. I am not a very good Christian and I strive to do better, but my failures, my weaknesses, my crack-pot ideas, and more have become the vehicles of Christ to show himself in me.
4. Life sometimes really stinks.