

The Vanna Factor

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Lent, 6 March 1988. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19:7-14; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-22.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In May of last year, Ted Koppel, of ABC's, *Nightline*, delivered a commencement address at Duke University on the 10 Commandments. In it he referred to Vanna White of the game show, "Wheel of Fortune", who has attained great popularity and name recognition over the last several years. I never heard of her until one of our members, Vera Star, played her part so well last year in our Senior Centers rendition of "Wheel of Fortune."

For those of you who've never seen Vanna White, she's a beautiful young woman who's always smiling. She comes across as being both sensual and innocent. She seems to thrill, rejoice, and adore everything she sees. Her job is very simple. She turns blocks on which blank sides are displayed to another side of the block on which a letter is displayed. She does this very well, very fluidly, with what appears to be genuine enjoyment. It's a joy to watch her. And she does it without saying a word. We don't hear Vanna. She speaks only body language. We have no idea what she thinks or believes. She's whatever you want her to be. Sister, lover, daughter, friend, never angry, non-threatening and non-judgmental. The viewer can project a thousand different personalities onto her.

Reading Koppel's description made me think - that's how many people view God - always smiling, never judgmental, non-threatening, never angry, a god who says nothing, and like Vanna, who doesn't seem to do much to justify his popularity. God is whatever you want God to be. We project onto God opinions we'd like God to hold and then find God very compatible with whatever we believe. God's a male chauvinist to some and a feminist to others, a revolutionary or the upholder of the status quo. Our

Scripture lessons this morning, however, confront us with a God of wisdom, power and ethical demand. Listen to what God says to us in the introduction to the 10 Commandments.

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." God says that to us today as much as he said it to the Children of Israel. We use to be slaves in Egypt, not as individuals of course, but as God's people. We Christians were slaves in Egypt, just like we Americans were once a colony of Great Britain. That's hard for us individualists to understand. It's hard for us to see ourselves as part of a family that goes back in time. But if you're a member of the Church you're part of a family whose ancestors were slaves.

^{So you see,}
^ The law's given to a people who've been, quite literally, saved, saved from slavery.^{Thinking the implications} Our salvation isn't earned by obedience to the law: God first saved us. This should curb any tendency to allow the Christian faith to degenerate into self-help religion. The Gospel is the Good News of what God has already done for us in Christ. We preach Christ crucified. We don't preach self-improvement and self-help religion.

I've heard so many people tell me, "I've got to clean up my life before I join the church. I don't want to be a hypocrite." Well, that's putting the cart before the horse. Don't try to clean up your life first! You don't have the power or the wisdom. You'll end up being either frustrated or self-righteous. Christ is the power and wisdom of God to clean our lives up. It's Christ who cleanses the temple of the Holy Spirit, both the Church and ourselves as individuals. Our part is simply to trust him as our Lord.

^{Now notice what}
After the introduction the first thing God says to us ^{next} is, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." What does it mean to have God? To have God is to love God as a wife loves her husband. In the marriage covenant

the bride says,

I take thee; to be my wedded husband; And I do promise and covenant; Before God and these witnesses; To be thy loving and faithful wife; In plenty and in want; In joy and in sorrow; In sickness and in health; As long as we both shall live.

When we get married we promise that we'll have no other lovers. A husband justifiably gets jealous if his wife messes around with other men. That's what the Bible means when it says God's a jealous God. He doesn't want us messing around with other gods. All God wants of us is our love and covenant faithfulness. Martin Luther said, "Love God and do as you please." He was right. If we really love God we ~~can~~ do as we please, *whatever* we please. And what will please us most is obeying God. And what will displease us most is disobeying God.

The 10 Commandments tell us, then, how a person who loves God will live. The first four Commandments deal with our relationship with God, and the last six deal with our relationship with one another. Jesus summed up the 10 Commandments in two sentences, "Love God and love your neighbor." We can't be in a right relationship with God unless we're in a right relationship with our neighbors. Religion is never just a private arrangement between me and God. No one can say they love God unless they love their brother and sister too.

Are the 10 Commandments still relevant in our modern world? Listen to what Ted Koppel said in his commencement address.

"We've actually convinced ourselves that slogans will save us. Shoot up, if you must, but use a clean needle. Enjoy sex whenever and with whomever you wish, but (be sure to practice 'safe sex'). The answer is 'No.'" (he says) Not because it isn't cool or smart or because you might end up in jail or dying in an AIDS ward, but "no" because it's wrong.... In the place of truth we've discovered facts. For moral absolutes, we've substituted moral ambiguity.... Our society finds truth too strong a medicine to digest undiluted. In its purest form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder. It's a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions. They are commandments. Are, not were.... Language evolves. Power shifts from one nation to another. Messages are transmitted with the speed of light. Man erases one frontier after another. And yet we and our behavior and the commandments which govern that behavior remain the same... What a huge, gaping void there would be in our informational flow and in our

entertainment without the routine violation of the sixth commandment, 'Thou shalt not murder.'" The career of Gary Hart floundered on violations of the seventh commandment, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'... The eighth commandment, "thou shalt not steal" is still relevant to the insider trading scandal. Watch the Iran-Contra hearings and keep the ninth commandment, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness.' And the tenth commandment seems to have been crafted for the 80s and the Me Generation, the commandment against covetous desires, against longing for anything we can't get in a honest or legal fashion.

Koppel concludes his address with a word of caution.

"I caution you... to set your sights beyond what you can see. There's true majesty in the concept of an unseen power which can neither be measured or weighed. There's harmony and inner peace to be found in following a moral compass that points in the same direction regardless of fashion or trend.

But as a minister of the Gospel I must add something to what Koppel said. I believe that if we're ever going to ^{get back to The 10 Commandments} have a moral and ethical revival ^{get back to the cross.} in the United States and in our church we must first have an evangelical ^{if ever we are to have a revival of morals, we'll need a revival of commitment to Christ.} revival. One of the most powerful books I've ever read was the *Journal* of

David Brainard, the son-in-law of the great New England preacher, Jonathan Edwards. David Brainard was one of the first missionaries to Native American Indians. Near the end of his journal he tells what he preached to the Indians. He says, "I never got away from Jesus, and Him crucified, and I found that when my people were gripped by this great evangelical doctrine of Christ, and Him crucified, I had no need to give them instructions about morality. I found that one followed as the sure and inevitable fruit of the other." David Brainard never taught the Indians morality.¹ He pointed them to Jesus on the cross.

When John Wesley came to the city of New Castle in England he wrote in his *Journal* that he'd never noticed such wickedness, such blasphemy, such cursing, such swearing even from the mouths of little children. And then he adds these words, "Surely this place is ripe for the Master." In preaching to those poor sinners he chose, not the 10 Commandments, but one of the tenderest texts he could find, "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities", words which Jesus

fulfilled on the cross. And then he tells us in the very next paragraph that when he was done, ^{preaching} the people ~~just~~ clung to his clothes and to his hands. He had brought them, not to Mt. Sinai and the 10 Commandments, but to Christ and him crucified. Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Surely our world, our nation, our town and our church are ripe for the Master. Surely we need a revival of morals and ethics. But that will never come until first we see in Christ, crucified, the wisdom of God and the power of God.

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one god, for ever and ever. Amen.