

A number of you have very kindly asked me how my dog is doing. For those who don't know, I have a dog named Jack whom I adopted from the Mecklenburg County pound a little more than five years ago. He is forty pounds of beagle mutt mess most of the time. We got off to a much-storied beginning wherein I made repeated trips to Wal-Mart and Target to buy an endless succession of flexi-leashes and baby gates to replace all that he chewed through. He was a mess of separation anxiety when I adopted him, culminating with his attempt to chew through the jamb of the door after I left one morning. That was the day the trip to Target was to buy a crate. And then there was the time he ate my hearing aid, but that's another story for another day. It took nearly a year of constant reinforcement, constant consistent behavior before he became the extremely affectionate, if bit exuberant pooch that runs my home today.

But when I moved to Atlanta, not knowing when my home would sell or lease in Charlotte, I moved into a short term rental in a high rise tower downtown. After a couple of weeks, I thought it was time to bring Jack to Atlanta so a friend arranged operation Jack-drop to bring him from my brother's home in Charlotte here to Atlanta.

The separation anxiety returned with a vengeance. Whereas Jack had been happy staying with my brother and sister-in-law in their home with their dogs, something about being on the 21st floor and going to a dog walk on the 5th floor set him back. I'm not quite sure just what didn't agree with him but he returned to being the dog who hid under the bed shaking. After two days, I knew what my responsibility was. I took him back to Charlotte and let him stay with his buddies Maddie and Daisy until I could make better living arrangements.

After I had been downtown for about a month, the owner of the rental disclosed on a Monday that she was in pre-foreclosure proceedings and there was a faint possibility that I might need to move out on a Thursday. “Nothing to worry about,” she said, “but just thought I’d let you know.”

I briefly considered hiding under the bed and shaking myself for a moment, but quickly determined it was time for new digs. Thus I moved in a basement apartment with a yard and brought Jack back to Atlanta. There was still separation anxiety but it was less dramatic this time, and I used bribery to make it better. There’s nothing like throwing a treat into the crate twenty-five times a day to make a chow-hound wander in to make sure he’s not missing out on anything!

We did this one more time when we moved into the house I bought at the end of June, and all is now well in the Mullis household. Jack wanders freely around the house and walks into his crate in good spirits when I leave.

Why do I begin with a story about plumbing the depths of doggie psychology? It is because the reality of living with a reactive creature (and we’re all reactive creatures) reminds me of the importance of constancy and consistency. That’s how dogs learn to trust. That’s how we all learn to trust. And that reminds me of the importance of our covenant life together.

A covenant life together is based on trust.

Exodus 20 is all about trust. Exodus 20 is all about a covenant life together.

We classically call this passage the Ten Commandments. And certainly there is a flavor of command about them. God does say them, after all. (They are so much a part of the

cultural vernacular as “the Ten Commandments” that my spell checker marked them as an error when I failed to capitalize the words “ten” and “commandments!”)

But in the Hebrew tradition, they are more accurately called the Decalogue; the ten words. They are God’s ten words about how to live a good life.

Together these ten words from God comprise the heart of the law, the heart of God’s definition of covenant community. These ten words describe the relationship between the people who are God’s people.

Theologians talk about the two tables of the law, dividing them into the first table of the law, which is about how we relate to God, and the second table of the law, which is about how we relate to each other.

God gave the law, which is outlined in the chapters of around these ten words and in greater detail in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy because God cares about how we live together. God cares that we learn to trust one another and learn to be with one another. What God wants for God’s people is a covenant community.

I said a couple of weeks ago that the Old Testament could be described as the rise, fall and redemption of God’s people, Israel. And it can. But it would also not be at all inaccurate to trace the story of the Bible, from the Old Testament into the new, as the story of God making and keeping covenants.

What is a covenant? It’s an unbreakable bond. When God makes covenants with God’s people, it is because God is trustworthy to keep them. The Bible tells the story of God’s covenants. We read in the Bible of God’s covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel and David. They are promises made that God keeps, regardless of whether the other party has maintained faith.

Indeed, the idea of covenant is so serious, so profound, that in the ancient near east when a covenant was made there were a couple of ways of signifying the importance of the covenant. One was to swear upon one's reproductive capacity in a subsistence culture where ongoing family was most definitely *not* assured – I'm not saying anything more about how that was done – and the other was to sacrifice an animal, the size of the animal being commensurate with the magnitude of the covenant. In the sacrifice of the animal, it would be divided into two halves and the two parties of the covenant would walk between the two halves in order to signify, “may thus and more happen to me if I do not keep my word.”

Graphic, no? Indeed when God made covenant with Abraham, the bull was sacrificed and God caused Abraham to fall asleep while God walked between the halves alone to keep Abraham from taking the culpability of his covenant on to himself.

God makes the covenants with us – indeed God makes the covenants for us, taking the culpability of failure on to God's own self, because God cares so passionately about how we live together. God wants God's people to live in love. That's why God makes a covenant for us.

Covenants are serious. Covenants are the foundation upon which a trusting community is formed.

Covenant communities are the communities we trust to be there for us. They are the communities we count on when we aren't able to carry the load for ourselves.

I was talking a pastor friend of mine recently who also sits on the board of directors for a major endowment. Because of his role as a director, he rubs shoulders with some extremely wealthy people. He invited the chairman of a major corporation, a well

respected man with no church home, to be present at his church for a service of worship he anticipated would be very moving. (You can probably tell I'm obscuring identities to protect the innocent!)

My friend – we'll call him Tom to make this story flow better – preached a moving sermon, the hymns and the anthems soared, and at the end of the service, his CEO friend came up to him and said, "Tom, you were right, I was moved. In fact, I was so moved that I gave an offering. All I had was a hundred dollar bill, so I sort of shuffled it under the other offerings so it wouldn't look ostentatious." Tom said, "thank you, that's very generous."

Later, Tom said to me, "what I really wanted to say to him was this: 'you don't need to hide your hundred dollar bill. Do you see that couple over there? They're both schoolteachers. You pay more in taxes in a quarter than they earn in a year. They have small children and they live on a budget but they still give the church nearly four thousand dollars each year. They are out-giving you by a ratio forty-to-one. Do you know why? Because they are members of a covenant community.'"

What God wants for us is to be part of something that upholds us.

That's why I sort of object to the objectification of the Ten Commandments. I don't like seeing them on courthouse lawns or legal chambers because that implies that they are a stick with which God intend to beat us and with which God expects us to beat each other. The Decalogue is not a measuring device of whether we are good. It is an instruction sheet to build our community around.

God wants right relationship for us.

That's why God spends the first five commandments telling us what God wants for us with relation to God. We're told that we're to trust God, not idols. We're told that we're to worship God – keep the Sabbath. We're told that we're to respect God, not to make oath's using God's name that we won't keep. It's a relationship based on trust.

And then God spends the next five telling us what God wants for us in relation to each other. And once again, the relationships are based on trust. "Be trustworthy!" God says, "Don't be someone who lies, cheats, steals, runs around on your partner, and grasps at what others have."

God has an image of what life together looks like and when we live it over time, it becomes community. It becomes a community in which we want to invest ourselves. It becomes God's outreach to the world to show that there is a way that is civil, that is good.

We don't have to look far to see where things are not the way they're supposed to be.

We discussed sin in Sunday School last week and we talked about the breakdown of shalom, of God's intention for creation that we should live in balanced well-being.

That's what *shalom* is – a wish for balanced well-being for the other and ourselves. Sin, we determined, was the breakdown, the vandalism of that *shalom*.

The vandalism of Shalom, the breakdown of community has been with us from the minute we were driven east of Eden. And we know its effects.

This epidemic of bullying behavior that seems to be targeting gay adolescents particularly harshly has its beginning in the violation of shalom. When we create a culture in which a desire for balanced well-being isn't a priority for adults, how should we expect adolescents to behave any differently? When our political rhetoric screams from the fringes that the other side is not worthy of respect, indeed that ideological opponents are

traitors, should it come as any surprise when a congressional representative is gunned down alongside a judge and countless others?

God's establishment of a covenant community, to which we are the heirs, of which we are the beneficiaries, is God's answer to the brokenness that comes when we experience a breakdown in civility and trust.

If we are to hear a great, "thou shalt not!" from this text, it is perhaps more rightly, "thou shalt NOT value thyself and thy neighbor less than I do!"

God's covenant community can seem at times as the minority report to answer the incivility with which we sometimes find ourselves surrounded.

I threw doggie treats into a crate in order to demonstrate to Jack that it was a safe place; that I could be trusted to come back. (Incidentally, the really big hello that follows the exit from the crate never gets old.) The truth is that trust takes time to establish. It is established by consistency and constancy, and well, being trustworthy.

God's covenants are the marker of God's trustworthiness.

When God invites us to be a part of that covenant community, we're invited to be moving markers of God's trustworthiness.

While I would never equate doggie treats in a crate with joining together in the Lord's Supper, when we approach this table here once a month or so, what we're really doing is reminding ourselves of the grace of God in which we trust. You remember what grace is?

It's the undeserved, unmerited, unconditional love of God.

When we come to this table, it is to remember our baptism, to remember that it is in a God who loves us that we place our trust. And in living out together our mutual trust in

God, we learn to live together. We learn to be a community of faith. We learn to trust one another. And that is the point of the Ten Commandments.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.