

COVENANT POWER
Sermon for Lent 3: Ex20:1-17
LPC, 3/15/09

For the past several months I've been pushing a radio program that is sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia called "Speaking of Faith." This program airs on West Virginia Public Radio Tuesdays at 8pm. I listen to it whenever I can. This past week the program was part of a series called "Repossessing Virtue." The focus of this series is to explore exploring the moral, spiritual, and practical aspects of the economic downturn. The host of the show, Krista Tippett, has been contacting people she has interviewed in the past to comment on the spiritual aspects of our current situation. As I listened I thought that this program was perhaps the most constructive thing I've yet heard about our floundering economy.

Each of these people was putting the worldly situation into a moral context. What do I mean by that? A moral outlook assumes that there are some ways of behaving that are better than other ways. Christian morality is based on the Ten Commandments and personified by Jesus Christ.

God's commandments have covenant power rather than coercive power. Covenant is actually more like "house rules" for a family than like civil law. Members of a mature and functional family observe certain standards of behavior. They do this not primarily out of fear of consequences but because letting down the family standards injures a relationship that they value. Covenant is like that.

The letter of the law is insufficient for the maintenance of covenant. With covenant, you don't get off on a technicality. Law is limited. Covenant is open-ended.

Let us look at the Ten Commandments, which are enumerated in today's lesson from the book of Exodus. As the basic tenets of covenant they say a lot more than they at first seem to.

The first commandment is "You shall have no other gods before me." This commandment is about the priority of God, not just about the name you give God. You can fulfill the letter of this commandment by worshiping only in a Christian church. All of us here fulfill that, easy. But to uphold the covenant implicit in this commandment we need to put God first, always, in everything. Do we do that always?

The second commandment is about not making idols to worship. Well, none of us are forging golden calves and having ritual orgies. A first glance this commandment too is easy to follow. But consider that in the context of covenant this commandment is about faithfulness to God when tempted by other glittering images, such as wealth, influence, fame, or even the latest fashion.

The third commandment is ostensibly about not using God's name to curse, but it's really about reverence and respect. You can keep a clean mouth, but if you are cynical, rude or arrogant toward God or toward anybody, you are breaking the covenant that this commandment is intended to support.

The fourth commandment is about keeping the Sabbath. I would love it if people respected this commandment just enough to come to church on Sunday, but it means more than that. In covenant, all time is sacred. To every thing there is a season. Sunday is a day for rest and worship but all time is holy if used in support of relationship with God and others. There is no part of the week that is not God's time.

Likewise honoring father and mother does not just stop there. This commandment is basically about honoring relationships. You are not free from this commandment when you are orphaned, as most of us are eventually. Honoring the relationship that began our lives should lead to the honoring of relationships throughout our lives.

As Jesus himself will note, refraining from homicide is not enough to fulfill the commandment against murder. To honor covenant, we observe this commandment by refraining from rage, vengefulness, humiliation and other destructive impediments to relationship with others. This commandment is about the sanctity of human life.

Not all of us will marry, but we can all fulfill the commandment against adultery. As a basis for covenant, this is not only a prohibition against extramarital sex. This is commandment about honoring trust.

The commandment against stealing is not just a condemnation of larceny, but a warning that selfishness destroys relationship. This is a commandment about selflessness and respect of others.

Bearing false witness sounds like a legal act. Most of us will find it easy enough to refrain from perjury in our lives. But as a basis for covenant this commandment is about personal integrity and truthfulness in our relationships.

Finally, the commandment against covetousness is obviously not limited to houses, spouses, slaves, or livestock. This commandment is about tending to our souls and relationships, and not just to things. As Jesus says, we should keep our minds on heavenly things, not the things of this world. Of course all of us have worldly concerns, but this commandment is about keeping those things in perspective.

Put all of this together and what does it say about our economic situation? For one thing, it's not hard to see how the breaking of covenant and commandment brought us here. People have been faithless, cynical, individualistic, disrespectful, untrustworthy, dishonest, selfish and materialistic. Maybe we have too, either by action or by acquiescence. We have broken covenant and our relationships have suffered. What do we do now?

We observe the commandments. We put God first, stay faithful and humble. We take time to pray, but regard our work days as God's days too. We honor all our relationships and respect other human beings, taking care to be trustworthy and respectful. We live with integrity and dwell on heavenly things while we take care of the worldly things. We keep covenant.

Above all we remember that God keeps covenant with us.