

## **On Obedience**

10-8-23

(Ex 20;1-4,7-9,12-20 & Matt 21:33-46)

Rev. J Koyama

This past Monday, Sheryl and I went to an Eagle Scout Ceremony for my nephew Silas and his friend Zachary Emond at the Montague Elks Hall in Turner's Falls. On the way in, I was happy to see smiling at me from the wall, the face of my friend Dick Newton. Dick is everywhere. In the town hall in Erving, attending worship up in Heath, and now I see that he is or was the head of the Montague Elks.

Dick is a good person. He comes from a time when people were much more obedient than we are today. He is from a generation who were brought up to value our institutions and to keep them strong.

### **The Ceremony**

The Ceremony began with the Scouts marching the flag to the front, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance, and an invocation. And then the Scouts came forward one by one to light candles representing the virtues that Scouts are supposed to aspire to. All the badges earned, camps attended and time together were for the purpose of instilling these values in each Scout. There was a candle for trustworthiness, loyalty, helpfulness, courteousness, kindness, obedience, cheerfulness, thrift, courage, cleanliness and reverence.

It was an inspiring evening. The ceremony reminded me of how people who were brought up with these same values made our country a beacon of hope and freedom through the whole first half of my life.

My Father grew up very differently. But these values had a huge impact on the course of his life. He grew up in Japan under a dictatorship, based on the loyalty to the Emperor. On one of her visits, his sister, my Aunt Tazuko shared with me how, as a 16 year old boy he hid under a wet mattress in the Tokyo river, the night his neighborhood was flattened by bombs. It was a terrible war and my father refused to justify any part of it on either side. But he always highlighted how the war in the Pacific came about. It was a result of blind obedience to the Emperor and he knew the terrible consequences personally.

One night, late in his life, he looked up at me from a chair in his study and told me in basically these words: "After the surrender we were afraid. But the Americans liberated us. He paused here for emphasis. They freed us from the Emperor system and helped us to become a constitutional democracy. They helped us to rebuild. "And," he said, waving his hand around at the bookshelves full of books, "they opened up bookstores." His lifelong love of reading came to him, in part,

through the reading material made available to him in his bombed out neighborhood care of the US military.

I understood him completely. I remember in my own childhood, reading comic books with pictures of “slanty-eyed Japs” with buck teeth and coke bottle glasses, and running around with swords, committing atrocities. And they did commit atrocities. So, I’m not naïve about the deep hatreds that existed.

But there was also a remarkable strain of decency and compassion in the American character that led this country to take up a policy of helping to rebuild one of the very nations that had been their sworn enemy. They did this, in spite of the fact that over 100,000 American boys never came home from the Pacific side of the war. Think about that.

That same basic decency was fully present and being confirmed once again at the Boy Scout Ceremony, and my eyes welled up with emotion, as Sheryl and I sat watching my nephew Silas and his friend Zachary light the top candles and receive the Eagle Scout scarf and pin; and as we watched them honor their proud parents. Talk about “passing the baton”. It seemed to me that I was witnessing the passing on of the

best in the American character, a distillation of values worthy of our obedience.

### **About Obedience**

But I feel that the scout ceremony was a ray of sunshine amid gathering storm clouds. And I think that this is partly due to a misunderstanding about the role of obedience, that has grown to become the accepted view over my lifetime.

It seems to me that a lot of people think that obedience in itself is a bad thing. We have come to look on institutions that seek to indoctrinate or instill values in others with distrust and suspicion. And I think it is clearly true that obedience has terrible consequences, especially when it is blind or unquestioning. My father would be the first to tell us that.

This distrust in our institutions is reinforced by the media, which has delivered us a steady diet of scandals. And because media sources thrive on telling sensational stories, every scandal is over amplified. So that now we have a population that believes that everything is corrupt, when that is not the case at all. And to make matters worse, an industry based on spreading conspiracy theories has been spawned to

cater to our suspicious natures. And this further destroys our confidence in our institutions.

This in turn makes us feel all the more insecure and more prone to turn away from the slow and messy workings of democracy and toward giving power to a “strong man” who promises to set things straight by giving direct orders that have to be followed without question; in other words, to a dictator. This is what I fear most, and it is what my father warned against, based on his life experience.

All of these considerations have rightly led people to become suspicious of being obedient to anything.

But I still think that obedience can also be understood as a very good thing. But it is only a good thing, if it is in the service of something that is worthy of our obedience.

Actually, I believe that every human being has a deep inner need to be obedient. We have a need to serve, a need to stand up and be accountable, a need to be part of something bigger than ourselves. We need something to uphold, defend and promote. It is just how God made us.

And so, I don't think that whether we should be obedient or not is even a question worth asking. One way or another, we are going to be obedient to something. The only question is whether what we choose to serve is ultimately life giving or ultimately destructive.

And so, I am all in favor of Silas and Zachary's pledges of obedience to the values of scouting. I recognize that scouting isn't perfect and that it has its problems. But I also believe that, we would be in a much better world if, as a nation, we stopped holding our noses and stepping away from our institutions and went back to working within them to improve them in obedience to the noble virtues they are supposed to represent. Because without these institutions constantly reinforcing these noble virtues, I fear that we will become less and less civilized and that the suffering that exists will only increase.

What makes me sad and also alarmed, is that Silas and Zach and his fellow troop members are the last significant cohort in their troop. In a few years, the remaining scouts will have gone through the system, the Scout Master plans to retire, and there is apparently no group of little cubs on the way up. Who will be there to challenge the next generation and pass on the nobility of character aspired to by our Scouts? And

likewise, who will be there to inspire others to live with Christ like compassion, when churches close their doors?

I guess I have yet to see anything that gives me confidence that the marketplace, schools, sports teams or that parents without the support of a community, have what it takes to fill the void that is being left as one by one these institutions close up shop.

### **Ten Commandments**

These are the same questions I used to ask myself, whenever I walked through the empty Sunday School classrooms up in Heath and saw the 10 Commandments thumbtacked to the wall, only there to be seen by myself and one or two other elders, looking for something in storage. It is the same question I ask myself as I walk through our own upstairs classrooms.

Like the virtues of Scouting, the 10 Commandments are worthy of our obedience. They are very different from the pronouncements of a dictator. They don't take away our freedoms. Instead, they defend our freedom in the name of a God who wants only the best for us.

The sentiment behind the Commandments is like a parent who warns a curious child not to touch a hot stove. Each one provides us with guardrails within which there is plenty of room to live a great life, while ignoring them basically ensures that things will end badly.

In my opinion, the best way to think of them is to compare them to the rules of the road. The rules of the road give us guidelines for how every car can move when it is on the road. So, yes, they do set limits on what we can do. And yet, these limitations that we accept are the very thing that makes it possible to go wherever we please without getting in an accident. They actually give us all greater freedom of movement than we would have if there were no rules at all and everyone was driving crazily about without restraint.

This is a very different and more mature way of thinking about rules than I and my friends had when we were in high school. We thought that rules were there to prevent us from enjoying the greener pastures on the other side; that they existed to prevent us from having a good time. And I guess that, at least in my case, it was only after breaking some rules and being burned, that I came to understand the extent to which following good rules actually makes possible the greatest freedoms, and how not following them leads to dead ends.



Let me pause to recite these Commandments briefly:

1. You shall have no other god's before me.
2. You shall not make false idols.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath Day and to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and mother
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against a neighbor
10. You shall not covet.

All of these Commandments are about our relationship with God and with each other. They are a roadmap to life, a roadmap that was surely consulted by those who chose the virtues of Scouting.

### **The Gospel Message**

I'd like to touch briefly now on what the Gospel message has to say to us about all of this.

It is not hard for us to understand that, for us, the vineyard that is being described is our nation and that the owner of the vineyard is God. And in the story, Jesus is also telling us that God has loaned us vast resources and given us the means to the most powerful agricultural and

industrial engine the world has ever known. Our vineyard and winepress are the envy of the world.

Jesus goes on to point out that God didn't loan us this vineyard to manage it as we please. It was loaned to us to produce the harvest God is looking for. And the harvest God is looking for is a harvest of mature souls; people who keep God's laws, not because they are forced to, but because they have been touched by the Spirit of love which motivated the creation of these laws in the first place.

God wants a harvest of souls who's devotion fills them with the sweetness and energy of God's saving grace. And producing such a harvest requires that the vineyard be organized and equipped for that purpose; so that the growing grapes will be given the right kind of soil, watered and nourished properly as they grow. Like good grapes, good people don't just pop up out of nowhere. They need to be cultivated.

### **Ownership of the Vineyard is Conditional**

There is a common belief amongst us that God has chosen our nation to play a special role in history and that this is permanently the case. And we feel reassured in this because God's love for us is unconditional, like the love of a good parent.

And this is where Jesus makes the main point in his story. Nothing about our previous relationship with God guarantees that God will therefore go along with whatever we do with what has been given to us. There is such a thing as falling out of favor, and when God's grace and righteousness are no longer being reflected in what we do, as a nation, we can expect that divine favor will be withdrawn.

### **Final Paragraph**

It is a stern warning. But I think that it is given in the same Spirit of love as the Commandments, like the parent who warns her child from putting a hand on the hot stove. Jesus warns us, because he wants what is best for us, and because he loves us. And he always will. But that love also entails expectations. Jesus is telling us that God will not humor any person or nation that refuses to devote itself to cultivating and sharing the same mercy and love with others, that they have been received.

So, let us not be afraid to be obedient to the love of God and to serve in part by moving our church ever closer to fulfilling the ideals for which it was created.

