

**"Rules to Live By"**  
**a worship service led by Rev. Jennifer Ryu**  
**Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists**  
**May 16, 2010**

**Chalice Lighting Words from the Book of Micah**

How shall I enter the Eternal's presence?  
Shall I come with sacrifices--  
With yearling calves to offer?

Would the Eternal care for rams in thousands  
Or for oil flowing in myriad streams?

What is Good?  
And What does Life ask of you,  
but to do justly,  
love mercy,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

**Call to Worship**

Some of you may remember hearing about Judge Roy Moore, chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. He revered the Ten Commandments (also known as the Decalogue) so much that he had them engraved on a huge piece of granite and placed in the rotunda of the State Judicial Building.

He really should have known better. He and his stone tablets have since been removed. Apparently, he and the enormous monument are available for lectures and revivals.

One commentary I read remarked that most people see the Ten Commandments as [quote] "heavy yokes to be publicly placed on the necks of a rebellious society. For such an understanding of the Decalogue, a two-and-a-half-ton rock sitting on the bed of a truck is a perfect symbol." ("Dancing the Decalogue" by Thomas G. Long, *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2006)

But must they be so? The introduction to the Decalogue in Exodus, Chapter 20, vs. 2 doesn't start by saying, "you'd better do this or else..." Rather, it begins with a statement of freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2).

It's unfortunate that the Decalogue's strongest association now is with an oppressive, authoritarian God and extremist Christians. This morning I ask that you set aside that two-and-a-half-ton stone tablet, set aside the image of Charlton Heston as Moses, set aside the idea of god as an disciplinarian, and consider the Decalogue a the finger pointing to the moon, rather than the moon itself--a Way rather than the End.

Wonder with me. . . . What might be gained by having some rules to live by? Not rules that restrict, but rules that liberate; rules that can free us from compulsion, fears and unnecessary suffering; rules that can deepen our connection to the Eternal.

Come, let us open ourselves to the Ten Commandments. Come, let us worship together.

### **Responsive Reading #607**

**One:** Cloak yourself in a thousand ways; still shall I know you, my Beloved.

**Many:** Veil yourself with every enchantment and yet I shall feel you, Presence most dear, close and intimate.

**One:** I shall salute you in the springing of cypresses and in the sheen of lakes, the laughter of fountains.

**Many:** I shall surely see you in tumbling clouds, in brightly embroidered meadows.

**One:** Oh, Beloved Presence, more beautiful than all the stars together,

**Many:** I trace your face in ivy that climbs, in clusters of grapes, in morning flaming the mountains, in the clear arch of sky.

**One:** You gladden the whole earth and make every heart great

**ALL:** You are the breathing of the world.

### **Interlude: Piano & Percussion**

#### **"From the Heart" by John Whitley**

#### **First Homily**

Maybe you have some words of wisdom you live by, like those John described in his testimony. Maybe they're posted on your fridge or above your computer screen at work. As a congregation we have words of wisdom expressed in covenants that guide us to deeper, more loving relationships.

I also have words of wisdom pinned to my bulletin boards and in scrapbooks, but I've never committed to any particular set of rules. Several years ago, at the end of a month-long retreat at the Plum Village Monastery, I, along with the other participants, was invited to commit myself to the Five Precepts for lay Buddhist practitioners. The Five precepts are No Killing, No Stealing, No Sexual Misconduct, No unmindful speech, and no unmindful consumption.

I declined. Here's the story I told myself and my friends about why I did not commit myself to the precepts. I understand these 5 rules to be the minimum moral obligation for anyone who is a practicing Buddhist. But I am an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. A practicing Buddhist and a parish minister. I couldn't reconcile the two, and so, I declined.

Just this week, this posture started to shift. It all started because I was curious about the Jewish festival of Shavuot, which begins in a few days. I wanted to know more about a holiday that revolved around cheese blintzes, cheesecake and cheese kugel!

I still don't know why there is so much cheese, but I did find my way to the Decalogue, which is the real reason for the season. So I started thinking about the 10 Commandments, but I couldn't get excited. They seemed really archaic and out of fashion, irrelevant to my life. Of course, I believe it's not right to kill or steal or lie or cheat on your spouse. But how are these rules actually relevant to my life?

I also had all these negative associations in my mind. I still remember Charlton Heston with those violent bolts of lightning cutting God's words into the stone tablets. And the great philosopher-comedian George Carlin telling us that we don't need ten commandments—two maybe, but definitely not ten.

Then I remembered my decision not to take the Buddhist Precepts, and I realized my allergy to religious authority is stronger than I had wanted to admit. I had to face the fact that I don't want any religion telling me what I shall or shall not do. But in preparing for this morning's worship service, I sensed that allergy starting to shift.

I have found a way to reconcile the Buddhist Precepts and the Decalogue in a way that is meaningful to me and how I am called to live my life. I want to share this reconciliation with you this morning.

I start with the idea that committing to something does not have to mean relinquishing my freedom. Sometimes commitments can bring freedom: the freedom from the suffering that comes when I violate my true nature, or violate the trust that another person has given to me. Freedom that comes when I rest my faith in Reality, instead of the false idols of my Ego.

I don't believe the Decalogue was given to Moses by God. I believe they were written by human beings; maybe they were divinely inspired. Whoever wrote them paid attention what opens the heart and what hardens it. They found that if they practice these ten commandments, they had more peace in their society, more harmony in their families, and more love in their hearts.

Three of the commandments are meant to bring peace to a society: thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, and thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house. These seem so simple. I'm sure most of you feel like you're in pretty good shape with these three. But today's world is so much more complicated than that of Moses.

Our lives and our destinies are intertwined, so we end up contributing to killing and stealing by proxy. The very ground we walk on was taken from the indigenous people. And state-sanctioned executions and war are just two ways of many ways we take part in killing. I don't say this to make us feel guilty, but to help us understand why there is so much brokenness and suffering in our society.

George Packard is one of the two and a half million people who served in the Vietnam War. After the war, George entered Virginia Theological Seminary and was ordained an Episcopal priest. Today he is the Bishop Packard and chaplain to Episcopalians in the Armed Forces and in the federal prisons. One of the reasons he entered the ministry was to tend to his wounds while helping to heal others.

"I violated the commandment, he said. "Thou shalt not kill. I KILLED people. I took lives. There are days when I meet with people trying to do what is good for the church--for others, and I think I am probably the only person here who has killed another human being." For this, he earned the Silver Star and two Bronze Stars for valor.

We wrap our young soldiers with the stars and stripes of righteousness and send them off to kill for us, telling ourselves this is essential for our safety, for our security, and sometimes for some ideological principle that isn't worth shedding a single drop of blood for. And when they come home to tell us what happened to them, what they did and saw done, we don't want to listen. We want to tell and hear stories of heroism, of valor, and honor. We want to know that integrity was always the order of the day. We can't bear to listen when they tell us of the terrible wound in their souls, of the lies they were told to justify the killing.

Bishop Packard found a dark knot in his own heart: the capacity that each of us has to commit acts of brutality. When he came home from the war, he tried to show it to others, but no one wanted to look into that mirror he was holding up for them. The Catholic philosopher, Josef Pieper, once commented that one of the deepest sources of psychic illness is the lack of courage to accept injury. Even if we feel completely powerless to stop war, and other killings, the very least we can do is have the courage to look in to that mirror and accept the pain it brings.

As for the third commandment, about coveting your neighbor's house, some would argue that desire for more and better material things is the very root of capitalism; that to deny it would be downright anti-American. But a mind that is constantly clinging to what it doesn't have misses the very life that it does have.

Using the language of the Buddhist precepts as well as the first three commandments of the Decalogue, and knowing that I will not be perfect, here are my first three rules for living:

First, I am determined not to kill – not by my own hand or the hands of others acting on my or my community's authority. I vow to cultivate compassion and respect for all life and wherever possible, to protect the lives of people, animals and plants. I will summon the courage to turn and face the reality of killing in our world.

Second, I am determined not to take that which does not belong to me, which includes the Buddhist practice of right livelihood. I vow to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources. I will summon the courage to turn and face the reality of killing in our world.

Third, I am determined not to succumb to greed. I vow to practice mindful consumption of food, commercial goods and cultural imagery. . I will summon the courage to turn and face the reality of greed and mindless consumption in our world.

### **Musical Interlude: Piano**

#### **Second Homily**

The next four commandments are meant to bring greater harmony to our families and close communities: thou shalt not bear false witness, thou shalt not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, thou shalt honor your father and your mother, and thou shalt not commit adultery.

Bearing false witness is more than simply telling lie. It includes all forms of unmindful speech. It includes slander, gossip, character assassination, rumor, insults and curses. Taking the Lord's name in vain is included in this list because it has to do with living up to your word—your sworn oath.

An old story is told of a king who directs his aid to go out into the kingdom to find the thing that brings both the greatest joy and the greatest suffering. After many days, the aid came back and reported that he had found that thing: the human tongue.

Bearing false witness does the greatest damage when it happens in insular communities, the closer the group, the greater the stakes and more competition for power. Nearly a decade ago, this community was divided by a conflict that was made worse by unmindful speech on email chats, in meetings, and posted on bulletin boards. Since then we have been cultivating mindful speech. Through our Committee on Right Relations we have a mechanism for reconciling and resolving conflicts.

The next two commandments address issues specific to family relationships. Of all the social forms, the family has gone through the biggest changes since Moses' time. Since the *mores* regarding marriage, children, wives and elderly parents have changed so dramatically, what are we to do with these commandments in our community in the year 2010?

For me, honoring my parents is part of my Confucian DNA as a native Korean. And since they were not abusive or neglectful, I guess I don't have any problem with this one. But wait, let me slow down and reflect more deeply.

Felicia reminded me of a scene from a movie I saw years ago. *Amistad* (released in 1999) is a true story about a group of enslaved Africans who overtake their captor's ship to return to their homeland. They are captured, and charged with murder. The day before the trial, John Adams, the lawyer defending the African man named Cinque, warns him that the trial will be difficult. "We

won't be going there alone," Cinque says. Adams answers, "Alone? Indeed not, no we have right at our side, we have righteousness at our side. We have....."

Cinque interrupts, "I meant my ancestors, I will call into the past, far back to the beginning of time and beg them to come and help me at the judgment. I will reach back and draw them into me, and they must come, for at this moment I am the whole reason they have existed at all."

The sixth commandment reflects this sensibility about our ancestors. It is still alive today, right here. At last Friday's Life Off Five concert, Reggie & Kim Harris told us of their ancestors, slaves brought to Virginia, made to work, made to lie with their masters. None of us just appeared on this Earth—independent and unconnected to history. We are the continuation of 6 millions of years of ancestors. They are the reason we exist. And WE are the whole reason they have existed at all.

Honoring your mother and your father doesn't necessarily mean that you have to call them every Sunday, although that would be nice. It doesn't mean that you should feel guilty if you can't move them into your house or visit them every Christmas. It certainly doesn't mean you have to agree with them all the time. Honoring our parents means living our lives in way that acknowledges the value they and those who went before them have brought to life.

The third commandment in this group of four is about adultery. Have you heard of the "Wicked Bible?" In 1631, an error in printing, perhaps a Freudian slip, caused this commandment to be printed, "Thou Shalt Commit Adultery."

To me this commandment is not really about sex. It's about deceitfulness. Deceiving others, like our spouse. But mostly deceiving ourselves about what we really want – about the true nature of our desire. If a person spends hours cruising singles chat sites while her partner is asleep or making dinner, is that excitement what her heart truly desires? When a teenager pushes his girlfriend to have sex because he doesn't want to be the only virgin in his class, is he being truthful to his deep self?

I want to cultivate my ability to listen to the suffering of others and the suffering that exists in my own mind and heart. To that end, using the language of the Buddhist precepts as well as the fourth through seventh commandments of the Decalogue, and knowing that I will not be perfect, here are here are three more rules for living to which I am committed:

First, I am determined not bear false witness. I vow to cultivate mindful speech, deep listening, and the integrity of my word.

Second, I am determined to honor my mother and my father. I vow not to betray my ancestors in word or deed.

Third, I am determined not to engage in sexual misconduct. I vow to practice truthful living, to know my own true desires deeply, and to honor my commitments and the commitments of others.

## Musical Interlude: Piano & Saxophone

### Third Homily

The final three commandments ensure our connection to God: thou shalt have no other gods before me, thou shalt not make for yourself a graven image, and thou shalt remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

Everyone serves something. And there are only two choices: Love, as Augustine said, is always directed either toward God or the self. Everyone serves an ultimate concern. If that ultimate concern keeps you in bondage rather than freedom, it is an idol – a false god that cannot bring you to a greater sense of aliveness and grace.

But if you keep the commandments, your relationship with your god or ultimate concern can open you to all that life has to offer. In this way of life, even the broken shards, losses, and painful experiences can be valued for the growth they bring.

In the newsletter, I asked you to send me your thoughts on today's worship theme. In addition to John Whitley's reply, I received another from a scientist and humanist. He said that he doesn't rely on a concept of God. But his ideas reveal a love of the Ultimate. He writes,

“One might say that this [godless] view makes for a cold, frightful universe, with humans cowering in a corner, brutish and powerless. By contrast, I find the universe to be rich and exciting, full of wonder at the evolutionary forces which produced us and succors us in the web of life on this planet. We are left to work out our own destiny with the attributes given us by our evolutionary history. We are tribal creatures: Born to work together for our common good, the intelligence to understand that our tribe is all of humankind and that our house encompasses the entire planet, and the moral sense to strive for justice.”

As for the final commandment, about keeping the Sabbath, Margaret has already led a worship service on that theme. I have just one thing to add. Some people like to argue about the Sabbath—whether it should be Saturday or Sunday--whether the grocery store should be open on the Sabbath day. But Sabbath is not about the right time or the right activities. It's about honoring the relationships in your life – with others, with yourself, with nature, with God.

Using the language of the Buddhist precepts as well as the eighth through tenth commandments of the Decalogue, and knowing that I will not be perfect, here are the final two rules for living to which I am committed:

I am determined to keep God as the center and ground of my life. I vow to practice observing my mind so that I know when I am serving idols – the small gods of fear -- rather than the Reality of eternal.

I am determined to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. I vow to set aside time during the day, and during the week to turn away from the world and turn toward the Eternal.

For those who've been keeping track, I made 8 vows up here today. Eight is a good Buddhist number. I am not ruling out the possibility that someday I may join a Sangha, a Buddhist practice community and take the 5 precepts. But for now, I am very happy to be your minister, practicing her 8-fold Commandments. I will probably keep revising these — at least as often as every ten years. As the burning bush reminded Moses, times change, you know!

We all need some guidance in our lives -- a list of rules, some basic beliefs that help to nudge us back onto the path when, inevitably, we stray. Spiritual rules don't have to feel like heavy yokes placed on the necks of a rebellious society. And they don't have to number 10 or 8 or 12. In fact, if someone were determined to boil them all down to just one, it wouldn't be that hard:

ONE Love, ONE Life.

May it be so. Amen.

**Closing Song: "One" by U2**