

## **“The Eleventh Commandment”**

### **A sermon by The Rev. David S. Blanchard**

from the pulpit of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Syracuse  
November 14, 1999

“Pursue some path,

however narrow and crooked,

in which you can walk with love and reverence.”

-Henry David Thoreau

Unitarian Universalists, being who we are - thoroughly non-creedal and highly resistant to any hint of coercive dogma or doctrines passed on from “on high”- are not by inclination or temperament too impressed (or influenced) by the image of a set of commandments being passed along to them, directing their thoughts and actions. I suspect that if Moses had been a Unitarian Universalist, we might have “The Ten Suggestions”, or “The Ten Considerations”, or “The Ten Vague Possibilities You Might Discuss at Coffee Hour.” I suspect that most of us would agree with H.L. Mencken when he commented, “Say what you will about the Ten Commandments, you must always come back to the pleasant fact that there are only ten of them.” I guess old H.L. might not have appreciated the premise of this sermon, and our collective effort to identify an eleventh commandment.

For those of you who might be visiting with us this morning, you are entitled to a little background into the origins of this morning’s service. About a month ago, I extended an invitation to the members and friends of this congregation to consider for themselves this question: Lacking a Moses to bring it forth, what is the single most important spiritual imperative necessary for the well being of Creation as we enter the next Millennium? The other 10 have been around for about 3,000 years, and by and large still make sense to those of us attempting to live at this edge of time. We might not be able to name them all, but on the whole they continue to shape the spiritual and moral lives of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and even a few Unitarian Universalists. Don’t kill. Don’t lie. Don’t be greedy. Give your parents a break (I paraphrase here.) Be faithful to your commitments. Take a day off now and then. Keep your language clean. Do not be fooled and taken in by false Gods. We may not have them posted on the walls to remind us, but surely they are deeply imprinted on our human psyche’s after all the countless generations that have gone before us, conscious of these very basic elements of the bargain struck between the Creator and Creation in a time and a land that are far, far from us now.

And so, to continue with how this sermon was born, my creative and visionary congregation shared with me something over 60 nominations for an “11th Commandment”. I got one from Rebecca Stevens in South Carolina. I got one from Natalie and Brainard Fancher in Ithaca. I even got a nomination from one of our former

ministers. A few came in too late to make the final ballot, but of those I had in hand, I was able to draft 18 different commandments, combining those with similar themes and concepts. Some of you wrote me extensive and thoughtful letters, arguing your case. Being a democratic faith, I turned the choosing back to the congregation. I had my single vote, like everyone else. The ballot went into the newsletter and in last Sunday's Order of Service, and everyone had the opportunity to indicate their top three choices.

On Friday, I tabulated the results.

We have an 11th Commandment.

I'll get to naming it a bit later in the sermon. I have a few other things I want to say about the whole matter of "commandments" in general. And to keep the suspense going, and maybe your attention, I also want to talk a little about the runners-up first.

But first, just so the lawyers in the congregation don't sit through the service in dread anticipation, the commandment that directed "Thou shalt not litigate without just provocation", was NOT chosen. We must have more lawyers in the congregation than I thought! It tied with "Thou Shalt eat dessert first." We'll need a lot more commandments before either of those two make the cut.

What we call the "Ten Commandments" appear in three places in the Hebrew Bible's book of Exodus. In Hebrew, they are the "10 Words"- direct and compelling language outlining the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Later, in the text, in the Book of the Covenant, hundreds of laws are spelled out about very specific situations that an agrarian society, with vineyards, livestock, and property to tend, would need to keep the peace. They tend to be conditional laws, such as "if so and so does such and such, you should do this..." But the 10 Commandments were, well, written in stone. They are the only place in the entire Hebrew Bible where God gets to speak for herself.

We tend to think of them as God's orders upon the people, but they are actually part of a covenant of relationship between the Creator and Creation. The commandments represent the responsibilities that both God and the People of Israel would follow. The commandments come down to Moses at Mt. Sinai only after the Exodus from the years of enslavement in Egypt. Because as the story is told, God "brought them out of Egypt", and demonstrated his end of the covenant. Because of God's demonstrated commitment to them, they committed themselves to these basic words or commandments. In form and style, the Commandments in Exodus 20 follow a standard pattern found in treaties written in the Near East in the 13th century BCE. In a great Mel Brooks parody, he has Moses coming down the mountain carrying three large stone tablets. He proclaims to the people he has come forth from the mountain, and from the hand of God has brought the 15 commandments. Just then, one of the stone tablets slips from his grasp and shatters on the ground. He looks down, then looks up. "Make that the 10 commandments." However they got here, they have been the least culture bound moral code ever to shape human society. They seek to establish a just and peaceable society based on the love of God and of neighbor. Today we tend to get lost in all kinds of theological arguments and semantic

debates about who, or what, God is, and just who is our neighbor? And, often, we end up loving neither.

So let me share my understanding of God and neighbor.

God is the ground of our being. Our source. 'The Other'.

Our neighbor is anyone who needs us. Anyone.

It's that simple.

It could be made more complicated, and usually is, but I feel comfortable giving you these "word frames" to put around the images that come to your own minds when you think of the "source of your being" (God) and contemplate the persons in this world who need you (neighbor). Most of the suggested 11th commandments reflected the highly relational, covenantal nature of the first 10 commandments. I thought that was a profound reflection of the kind of deep religious thinking that is going on within this congregation. I feel confident that Moses would have been proud to slip our commandment in along with the others, if its significance, its urgency, could have been imagined 3,000 years ago.

As the 20th century comes to a close, we find we live in a society which is governed - for the most part - on contracts. People get married and they draw up a pre-nuptial contract outlining each party's rights should the union fail. People have contracts with each other in business to determine the individual benefits that will accrue to both parties because of the conditions of the contract. We ask people to sign contracts in employment, contracts designed to protect the individual concerns of each party. How would we live without contracts to protect and preserve our interests? The world in which the 10 commandments were shaped was a world based not on contracts, but on covenants. Covenantal relationships differ from contractual relationships in that people who share a covenant are focused on their duties to each other, rather than their rights in relation to each other. Those in a covenantal relationship would perhaps value more highly a duty to listen to each other, than the assertion of their own right to speak. Relationships are valued over individual rights. Covenants emphasize the common good rather than private benefit. We have lost not only the language of covenant at the end of the century, but also the example, the places in our lives where we might become fully engaged and united with others in the creation of something more enduring and important than ourselves. This, I think, is the purpose of communities like this. Imagining an 11th commandment, and if we would - choosing to become committed to it - is just a small expression of how we might more fully function as a covenantal community.

Of the 18 nominees, there were 5 that rose to the top of the heap, though even between the top 5, they were clearly separated by significant percentages of votes. (I'm certain that the notion of selecting a commandment by the democratic process will strike some as pure blasphemy, an insult to God. Well, since God is not talking, I can only hope God is listening. The commandments we have envisioned add nothing to God's duties

enumerated in the first ten. The commandments we have given voice and value to are all entirely up to us. We can use all the help we can get from anywhere, but our commandments spell out profound challenges to our own souls to find ways to live in greater harmony with each other and with all that is, and was, and ever more shall be.)

Bringing up the rear of the top five was this:

Thou shall laugh often.

I was glad that made the cut. Almost half the people voting included this one in their three choices. It may lack the theological depth that the others offer, but when it comes to living together in community, the ability to laugh together is sometimes the only thing that keeps you going. To laugh at ourselves, to laugh at the absurd, to laugh at the delightful, to laugh at the clever, to laugh at the silly. Laughing, like crying, opens a part of the spirit that gives us access to our most basic humanity. With all people, of whatever culture, race, age, or creed, laughter reminds us to lighten up, to enjoy each other, to treasure moments of joy. Maybe it's a more theological commandment after all....

Fourth of the five was this:

Thou Shall Not Judge.

There were many variations on this theme when the initial nominations came in. But this was really the sum and substance of those many ideas: the notion that it is essential for the human family to relate to each other less out of judgment than out of understanding. The impulse to stand in judgment of others has become a powerful force in our society, and in no small part, it has been generated by parochial religious teachings that have painfully declared some barren of worth and dignity. We do it to huge groups of people based on things like skin color and the gender of those we love. We do it to individuals whose singular differences frighten and alarm us. We do it to people we love even, whose understanding of truth is slightly different than our own. We humans seem more bent on this than other species. When I was preaching in New Hampshire a month ago, an old gentleman came through the line, and shared with me his observation on this theme, in saying that he'd noticed that his dog was always glad to play with whatever kind of dog he happened to meet! He asked me why humans can't do it so well. Even though it didn't get the most votes, I recommend this one to you without reservation.

The second runner-up was this one:

Thou shall remember always to be as genuine love is: understanding (not judging), sharing (not hoarding), empowering (not disabling).

I suspect that this had appeal in that it reflects some of the most fundamental aspects of fulfilling human relationships- be they expressions of intimate love, familial love, or universal love. It is often said that God is love, and so this commandment is a call to humans to model their relationships with each other on the example of divine love. For

those that may doubt the possibilities of love in this world, this commandment offers the tools that, if used consistently, lead one into a kind of love they may never have experienced with others. One can only know this genuine love if they are willing to take the many risks of being in relationship with wounded and wary souls whose pain keeps them closed to closeness. To live in accordance with this commandment, one exhibits a vast faith in something impossible to see, hear, or touch. Something as mysterious as God.

The first runner up, running a strong second was this:

Thou Shalt Be Kind.

Being kind. It seems so basic, so elemental. Maybe it is too basic for our sophisticated world. "Being kind" seems like the sort of thing a Girl Scout or a Grandmother might be. Sort of sweet, sentimental, and inconsequential. Generally, it is no great sacrifice to be kind. It doesn't usually take us out of our way, cost us anything, or earn us much in reciprocity. We give up our seat on the bus. We reach a jar on a high shelf for a "vertically challenged" person at the grocery store. We agree to deliver a plant to a homebound church member at Christmas. Big deal, right? It must be. Why else would more than half of us give it high priority for being the most significant thing we could do for each other as we cross over into the next century? I assume it is because it is not something that happens enough in our lives. Think about that. I like 'being kind' as a commandment for its simplicity and its immediate transformative power. The Dalai Lama has said his religion is kindness. Try it for a day. Choose to be kind. Change the world.

Our Eleventh Commandment, selected by 75% of those casting a ballot, is this:

Thou shalt honor, respect, and care for the earth and all things, living and nonliving, that dwell thereon and therein, for they give us life and must be preserved to sustain the unfolding web of creation.

3,000 years ago, this was not something that would have made sense to Moses or his people. In fact, if there was an environmental ethic in those days, it would have been more along the lines of needing to subdue the forces of nature, and place them in their control and use. This kind of thinking continues, subtly, in the whole notion of "stewardship" of the earth, which has its origins in a biblical world view of Genesis where God gives human beings "dominion" (domination) over all of creation. 3,000 years later we are catching on to the reality that we need a new set of directions, a new commandment, to guide us in our relationship with Creation. We have come to a point in time when we have to take ourselves out of the center of the created universe, and find ways to live in balance with our sisters and brothers created in images other than our own: the wolf and the heron, the redwood and the oak, the crabgrass and the earthworm.

Whatever we make of the being of God, the one thing that seems certain, that we all might agree with, is that God does not talk to us like she used to. No more burning bushes. No more plagues. No more warnings about floods. Nothing else written in stone.

But I would not necessarily conclude from that that we have ceased to get messages about the urgency of change in our relationship with Creation. Where do those messages show up? In the quiet extinction of species every single day. In the falling of acid rain. In the acres and acres of earth torn open and given over to landfills. In Onondaga Lake's permanent despoilment. In holes in ozone layers and climactic change. In famines where millions of lives can not be sustained. In the identification of "cancer pods" where disproportionate numbers of folks suffer from certain cancers. In the unchecked loss the rain forests, wetlands, and wilderness. There are no shortage of messages. They come to us here and now, often faster than we can absorb them. We may not recognize the handwriting, but there seems little doubt about the response that we are called to make in our covenant with each other and with the source of our being, the source of creation, which some call God.

Like the first 10, this last commandment transcends time and cultures. It summons us to live together, fulfilling duties that we acknowledge to one another and to the future- to the common good- , rather than acting in ways that merely bring benefit to ourselves or sustain our private interests. It will take more, of course, than a little band of Unitarian Universalist at the corner of Nottingham and Waring Roads in Syracuse to elevate this commandment to general agreement, acceptance and practice. It is not an idea original to our minds. But in the process of considering the question, I believe that it has, or will, move many of us one step closer to incorporating such an ideal into our actions. After all, do you really think Moses was talking to a crowd bigger than this when he came down from the mountain? And look where those commandments ended up.

That alone, to me, is a reason for hope.

Amen, Shalom, May it be so....