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Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22
Commandments at the Oscars

Wow! Can you see Jesus over-turning tables and driving merchants and moneychangers out of the temple? It is a gutsy action and understandable. We accord the same respect for our sanctuary.

It is an amazing story and so important to the gospel writers that it appears in all four gospels except that in Matthew, Mark and Luke it appears at the end of their gospels and in John at the beginning. John still refers to Jesus's death and resurrection.

The Jews say to Jesus, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answers them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then say, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

I am astounded with the unquestioning nature of the Jews in this story. They could have said, "What do you mean when you say, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Instead, they bungle into a literal response. The disciples came to understand later what Jesus meant. Jesus hardly speaks in literal terms, especially in the Gospel according to John.

That's introduction to the sermon. The first biblical text is, of course, the famous 10 Commandments. The Hebrew community receives them in the early days of their relationship with God. God was establishing ground rules for this relationship. The "words" or "commandments" give tone and spirit to all subsequent collections of biblical law. There are many expressions of law in the Bible.

Jesus sums up the law by joining two chief emphases of the 10 Commandments. In the Gospel according to Mark, a scribe asks him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe says to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus sees that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:28-34)

While the 10 Commandments are specific in a way and general in another way, Jesus’s summary is way too general but has a lovely spirit. There’s a nice interplay between the two. Although the commandments are frustratingly general, I thought it would be fun to look at the texts through the recent Oscar nominated movies in the Best Picture category. I will make movie connections without giving too much of the plot in case you have not seen the movies. I’ll make passing reference to the Gospel story as well; in fact, I’ll begin there.

In “Birdman” or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance), whatever that means, the plot is confusing. The protagonist, it seems, doesn’t know what he’s getting into; he is ignorant, it seems, of his comeback as an actor and seemingly flies away as a bird in the end. We really don’t know what becomes of the protagonist. It is hard to track his story. The disciples do not know what Jesus is saying after he rips into the temple. They are ignorant but will come to know in the end what Jesus meant. They get the story and so do we.

The film, “Boyhood,” took 12 years to make. It goes through the life of a boy from about six years old to graduation from high school. He grows up with his divorced parents. His mother in the film, Patricia Arquette, won the Golden Globes, British and Oscar awards for Best Supporting Actress. In the movie, love by the mother trumps “You shall not commit adultery.” This strict “shall not” has its complications when the mother divorces her first husband because they do not get-along and yet he is a nice dad and she divorces the second husband because of his alcoholism and abuse.

“You shall not commit adultery” establishes the ideal, in other words, we honor the vow we make with our spouse and work through difficulties. In every pre-marital counseling session, I mention that there are extenuating circumstances where divorce can be a liberation, as stated by Harvard Divinity School New Testament scholar, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in a talk she gave 30 years ago at SFTS.

The last two commandments state, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

In the first Wednesday evening Lenten discussion Stephanie asked us to write a letter to our neighbor and whether the neighbor was real or imaginary, the rule

in the writing was to regard our story as fiction. This protects the story. Most of us wrote to the neighbor next door and yet Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan as neighbor, which extends the scope of neighbor to a person of another ethnic and religious group. It is a person bloody and beaten at the side of the road.

It is tough interpreting the commandments in the realities of our world today. Popular culture brings us movies like “American Sniper” and “Selma” and we do our best to make sense of them politically, biblically and theologically.

Neighbor in the 10 Commandments could be neighbor near or far. In “American Sniper,” we ask, “How do we regard Iraqis as neighbor?” This is a tough question and complicates the situation. In the movie, doors of homes are bashed down and families horribly disrupted in the US army’s search for enemy combatants. To what extent have we borne false witness against our neighbor to justify our presence in Iraq? We do not covet their houses and yet we destroy them. US personnel are after “terrorists” and I do not want to downplay that pursuit.

A positive outcome of the movie through its sad ending is exposure to the plight of veterans and the issue of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The work that needs to be done to provide care for veterans in this regard was highlighted at the Oscar Awards ceremony.

Two of my favorite movies were, “The Imitation Game” about WWII code breaker, Alan Turing, and “The Theory of Everything” about Cambridge student turned professor in theoretical physics, Stephen Hawking, who is diagnosed with a motor neuron disease. The films are extremely well acted. Eddie Redmayne also won all the awards in the Best Actor category and although his wife in the movie acted by Felicity Jones should have won awards, she was pipped at the post by an equally compelling actress in Julianne Moore in “Still Alice.”

When I express appreciation of scientists, and I do more and more these days, I express it in terms of an oxymoron. I say, “Thank God for scientists.” Although an oxymoron in that it invokes faith and science in the same phrase, I see no contradiction in the two. God created science and evolution.

Turing, Hawking, and the researchers of Alzheimer’s in the scripting of “Still Alice” make excellent strides in saving humanity and the earth. This is affirmed in Jesus’s invocation of love of neighbor.

The remaining two movies are “The Grand Budapest Hotel” and “Whiplash.” The Grand Budapest was simply fun with amazing color, costumes and music affirmed at the Oscars by winning Best Production Design, Best Costume Design and Best Original Score. The movie aligns with the 11th commandment,

the Presbyterian injunction to glorify God and enjoy God forever. Fun and laughter are indeed good medicine.

I leave the worst for last, "Whiplash." The subject of my email to my friend in London after the movie was, "Whiplashed." That is how I felt after watching the sadistic, abusive and abrasive teacher in the movie. His primary culprit is the new drummer in his college jazz band. My London friend's son experienced similar abuse from a record producer when he drummed for band a few years ago. It was hard for my friend, a film and Oscar buff, to sit through the movie.

The actor, J. K. Simmons won all the awards for Best Supporting Actor. He was so good that he almost caused me a sleepless night. I was so upset with him and his style of teaching. For him, the worst words you say to a student are, "Good job." For him, to bring the best out of a student is to demean, belittle and to slap them and threaten their place in the band in order to push them to excellence. It works up to a point but crashes in the long-term. One of his students commits suicide later in life because of this treatment. There are consequences for the teacher but I will leave that for you to see if you choose to watch the movie. It is an excellent film.

In my book, the teacher violates every commandment. That's a radical interpretation but I'll leave it at that. I look forward to discussing the scripture texts, sermon and worship elements with you in the fellowship hall. I have copied for each attendee the biblical texts and the Oscar line-up and wins in every category. Amen.