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St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
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Proper 25A

America and God A Sermon

There are Ten Commandments. Let's review:

I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods but me. You shall not make for yourself any graven image. You shall not take my name in vain. Remember the Sabbath Day (for you Christians, that means Sunday) and keep it holy. Honor mom and dad. Do not murder, steal, or commit adultery. Do not lie about your neighbors, or covet their things.

If you have not learned these yet by heart, or taught them to your children, those are worthwhile projects for a rainy afternoon. While you are at it, why not go on and memorize the Gettysburg Address?

Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.

We celebrate both Moses and Lincoln as great "emancipators" who led people out of slavery into freedom. Moses is also famous for handing down the law, especially those Ten Commandments. The philosopher Immanuel Kant taught us the strange truth that to live by what we want is slavery; it is only when we begin to live as we believe we ought to live, that we are free. The Ten Commandments are a great instrument of freedom.

Today, in Deuteronomy, we hear this:

Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah . . . and the LORD showed him Gilead as far as Dan . . . Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea.

Moses sees the Promised Land, and then he dies.

To our Southern ears, does this not sound familiar? Mount Nebo, Danville, Pisgah, Mount Judea (which we pronounce "Mount Judy") are places on the map in Arkansas. "Manasseh" calls to mind Manassas, the first great battle in the Civil War. Perhaps connections such as these were what Faulkner had in mind in saying: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

For us, the death of Moses evokes the death of Martin Luther King:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land.

That was King in Memphis, April 3, 1968.

Many scholars take the view that laws like the Ten Commandments are the true purpose of religion. The theory goes like this: Where people are honest, peaceful, law-abiding, a society can flourish; what makes people law-abiding is reverence and fear of God.

The first premise is surely true. Apart from lawfulness, society disintegrates. I am thinking now of Greece, Northern Mexico, parts of Africa, even pockets in the United States. The second premise could also be true, that faith helps uphold and reinforce the law. If so, expect the loss of faith to be followed by loss of respect for law, and then a general deterioration of society.

America is about to test that theory. Last week, I was in New York for a meeting of the General Seminary board. The Bishop of New York, who chairs the board, shared this sobering statistic. If I heard him correctly: over the past decade in the United States, for all Christian denominations church attendance has declined collectively by 10%. That is a big problem for the church; and, if the sociologists are right, it is a sign of coming trouble for America.

As if we didn't have enough already.

In *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon said of the religious climate in ancient Rome: "The various modes of worship . . . were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful."

In the United States today, I think that is pretty much where we are.

A case in point is the recent flap concerning Mitt Romney's Mormon faith. A Baptist pastor opined that Christian voters should prefer competent candidates who are also genuinely Christian, and that the Mormon faith is, by definition, not. "Cult," I believe, is the word he used. The philosophers, people, and magistrates are outraged.

The philosophers, considering all religions equally untrue, think that for a Baptist to call the Mormons cultish is pot calling kettle black. The people, considering all religions equally true, say "to each his own." The magistrates invoke John F. Kennedy.

In the election of 1960, Kennedy's catholic faith had him on the political defensive. In an address to the protestant ministers of Houston, Kennedy appealed to the principal of church-state separation, which he interpreted to mean that religion and politics occupy completely separate and independent spheres in our society. "I believe in an America," he said, "where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials."¹

On Oct. 16, seven days ago today, our nation dedicated a new monument on the Washington Mall to honor a man who, as president of a religious body, graciously imposed his will, directly and indirectly, on the general populace and the public acts of their officials. The religious body was called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the man was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King.

If my faith tells me it is wrong to bear false witness, and if my political opponent might be vulnerable to a certain kind of disinformation—how does my faith not enter into my political decisions? If my faith tells me I must love my neighbor—and it surely does—then how does that not enter my political decisions? And where, if not from faith, did the idea that "all men are created equal" come from?

I hope you have read C.S. Lewis's great little book, *The Screwtape Letters*. This is a manual of advice from one devil, Screwtape, to another, Wormwood, about how to keep his human "patient" ignorant of his spiritual condition. Like us, the devils have their good days at the office and their bad.

I think Screwtape could claim our modern notion of religion as one of his singular professional achievements. Now, when important questions come up, in America we say "we don't talk about that: that's religion." When questions of religious truth are raised, we say "yours is true for you, mine is true for me." Try that in biology, history or philosophy.

Lately, we hear the talk of "spirituality without religion." That idea has Screwtape turning cartwheels. There is scant danger that this spiritual but not religious person will ever give the devil more than a moment's worth of trouble. "Spiritual but not religious" might give you Madonna; it will not give you Martin Luther King.

The devil's problems begin when a church understands its task like this: Proclaim Christ-crucified and risen. Gather the people in faith, strengthen them in love, and send them out into the world in hope, in trying times.

The devil has a big problem with the Ten Commandments. Perhaps, as sociologists suggest, these practices are useful; but that is not why we keep them. We keep them because the law of Moses is near and dear to the heart of a great moral, intellectual and spiritual tradition, centered on Christ who, as we believe, holds the truth of our world's origin and meaning. Morality is grounded in truth.

My next project for the church will be teaching high school students that intellectual, moral and spiritual tradition. To that end we are creating a student theological debate society. The best response, to the problem of declining faith, is faith. Christian faith is reasonable, beautiful, and good. (Go to the Washington Mall, and have a look.) Our society has not rejected faith; rather, it doesn't know it. We have to teach it and we will.

Along with faith, we must also teach our growing children reason. When young people begin to think, hard and carefully, about important questions, then the devil has got a problem. This is Screwtape, warning Wormwood about the dangers of debate:

My dear Wormwood . . . the trouble about argument is that it moves the whole struggle onto the enemy's own ground. . . . By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient's reason; and once it is awake, who can foresee the result?"²

Once again, our country is in trouble. Our problems are not merely political and economic; at bottom, they are moral, intellectual, and spiritual. That is to say, they are religious. So are the solutions. Let the recovery begin here, in church, in us.

The past is not dead, nor is it past. For this remains . . .

the great task remaining before us—that from [our] honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion . . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.

¹ John F. Kennedy, "Address to the Ministers of Houston," Sept. 13, 1960.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Chapter 1, page 8.