

“Thou Shall Not Steal” (Decalogue)

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Prayer

Gracious God, we have been a stolen people ransomed by your love and grace. Teach us what it is to be faithful and true – people of integrity – with respect to all of the resources to which you give us access. Amen.

Scripture

Exodus 20:15

Context

The 20th Chapter of the book of Exodus opens dramatically with Yahweh speaking, a God that is so intimidating and can't be seen but can be heard. This powerful life giving and taking force is on the mountain demonstrating the omnipotence of being the Supreme Ruler. GOD established GOD's authority to do so. GOD also reminds the hearers of the covenantal relationship with GOD, “I'm your GOD I brought you out of Egypt and therefore out of slavery.” This chapter occurs after the famous dry highway story when those who have been delivered find themselves forgetting the covenant they had with The Deliver. Yahweh comes with new tools for living designed around the theme of “law and order.”

Exegesis

This lesson explores one of the commandments from “the second tablet,” the last six commandments. These commandments are concerned not just with personal our behavior but with our relationship with our neighbors. They are summed up in the second half of the summary of the Decalogue, “You should love your neighbor as you love yourself. The eighth commandment as stated in Exodus 20:15 says, “You shall not steal.” This, like the other commandments, is simple and, on the surface, it would seem that little interpretation is necessary.

Conversation

Exodus is a story that resonates with African Americans particularly. Moses is a hero. Many sermons are preached about walking through the sea on dry land. Yet there seems to be less focus on the covenant and the Ten Commandments in teaching and preaching. While many African American households are steeped in the rudiments of religion if one considered the number of African Americans in jail and prison it would seem that somehow the commandments have not resonated with us. As we explore this commandment in particular: what does it mean to the descendants of those who were “stolen” from their land to then be commanded not to steal?

Biblical Scholar Dwight Allan Callahan suggests that African American's love affair with the Black Church is with the story of deliverance and Moses not the covenant or the laws that seem contrary to their lives. He states, "Exodus became an apologia for the commandment against stealing." The law was and is consistently broken by those who hold the law in their hands. Famed writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, speaks of what it means to have a legacy of plunder versus a legacy of profit in his now famous article, 'The Case For Reparations'. It seems that the legacy of being stolen has plagued us. African Americans continue to live plundered lives. Land was stolen from many families in the South who worked land and had a "covenant" with land owners only to find themselves landless after years of labor. Yet there are still no reparations. Our wages are plundered as we work more and are often paid less. Our communities are laden with predatory lenders charging ungodly interest rates, yet the law remains, "do not steal." The Black Lives Matter Movement has reminded us that our bodies and lives continue to be plundered.

Questions

1. How might we inform a new generation of Bible students who dare to interrogate the text in juxtaposition to their current situations and help them to be more faithful than the world has historically been to them?
2. Explore the ways in which the Bible seems to conflict with reality?
3. How can we be faithful to the Word of God and honest about that which impairs our ability to do so?
4. In addition to the physical stealing of property what other ways can we be mindful of this commandment?
5. The commandments seem punitive to some especially those who have broken them and been convicted in court; how can we demonstrate grace and embrace those returning citizens in our congregations, families and communities?