

The Long Haul Goes On:
Ten Commandments for the Long Haul - Revised
Galatians 6:9-10; Hebrews 12:1-3, 12-13
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 8) 2020
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I realized that you had to slow down the fire, because you'd burn up the fuel and it would be over. That's when I started trying to calm myself down, step by step, that it wasn't going to come as a great explosion automatically. It had to be made, or it wouldn't happen... That's when I started saying, "Horton, get yourself together, get ready for the long haul..."

- Myles Horton

If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

This morning, many of us join together in breathing a sigh of relief. The election is over! Hallelujah! We will have a change in Washington! Amen! But we still await what will happen with the Senate. For me, the thing that boggles my mind is the knowledge that almost half of the voting population voted for bigotry and racism, and rage. I know that not everyone who voted for Trump has these views, but almost half of the voting population decided not to repudiate these views. It's shocking and a reminder of what the Bible calls the apocalyptic – the reality of truth is revealed and it's not pretty.

This morning, I remind you we have much to do. The calling of being followers of Jesus is for the long haul and these days, the long haul seems to get longer.

It's hard to stand on tiptoes when you're hunkered down – especially when you have to do both for a long time. Most of the New Testament is written to small communities of faith, little churches, trying to hang on in the midst of persecution and ostracism, while also attempting to be faithful to Jesus. Jesus had urged them to be awake, look for the kingdom breaking in around them, so they stood on tiptoes looking, watching, being ready, serving, loving.

But they had no idea it was going to take this long. After a while, they grew tired. Time passed. The little cemetery behind the church began to fill up and Christ still had not come like they thought. The world was not getting any better; indeed, it seemed to be getting worse, and these small bands of Christ-followers were weary and discouraged. They were hunkered down against the darkness while also trying to keep standing on tiptoes looking for signs of the Christ. That's hard to do.

The great apostle and community-organizer Paul wrote to one such small church he had helped organize in Galatia saying, “Don't grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

And the preacher to the Hebrews reminded that small exhausted congregation of their faithful ancestors, so they could keep on keeping on. He said, “Strip down for the long haul, throw aside whatever sin weighs you down. Travel

light. Keep running and don't quit." He went on, "Come on, you can do it! Lift those weary legs; come on, get your head up" (Hebrews 12:1-2, 12-13).

One of those ancestors who encourages me is Myles Horton. Horton was born and raised in poverty in the hills of Tennessee. Eventually he went to Union Seminary in New York where he was a friend and classmate of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1930-31. In 1932, with some friends, Horton founded the Highlander Folk School, in the mountains of east Tennessee, to help organize poor folks in their struggle against injustice and exploitation. During the 30's most of his focus was on labor organizing but by the 1950's Highlander was doing civil rights training, as well. For example, Rosa Parks went through extensive training at Highlander not long before she refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, AL in 1955.

Horton died in 1990, but not before finishing his memoirs called, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*, in which he wrote about how this work was going to take longer than he realized. He said, "I realized that you had to slow down the fire, because you'd burn up the fuel and it would be over. That's when I started trying to calm myself down, step by step, that it wasn't going to come as a great explosion automatically. It had to be made, or it wouldn't happen... That's when I started saying, 'Horton, get yourself together, get ready for the long haul...'" (p.81).

This morning, I'm saying to you, small community of faith called Austin Heights Baptist Church: Get yourself together, get ready for the long haul. We're called to endure and persist. Discipleship is no longer abstract. We are called to be followers of Jesus who invest our lives in love and mercy, not hate and fear, who

believe in loving God, loving our neighbors as ourselves and who stand for justice and peace. This is long haul, long-term stuff. We won't make it if we're not prepared.

Four years ago, I preached "Ten Commandments for the Long Haul," so this morning I want to talk about these same ten commandments with revisions. This long haul goes on, and in this divided society, full of rage and racism, facing (and not facing climate change), it seems that that it is a lot longer than we thought. So, to help us make it, to help us stand on tiptoes while hunkered down for a long time, here are my Ten Commandments for the Long Haul - Revised:

- 1) **Know where you're going.** Or as our sisters and brothers in the black church and the Civil Rights Movement used to sing, "Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on." Over the long haul it is easy to go off on detours or become distracted or end up on roads that initially looked like the correct route, so it is essential to keep our eyes on Jesus Christ and his Beloved Community. Centering our lives on political leaders and parties won't do. False messiahs are exactly that – false. As a result, many will consider us eccentric (literally off-center), and we are. It's just that our center is different from others. We are centered in Christ and keep our eyes on him and Christ's Beloved Community.
- 2) **Get in shape.** Long haul journeying means getting in proper condition so we can endure to the end. For those of us following Jesus, it means deepening our lives in Christ through corporate worship, prayer, Bible-reading, serving others, and other classic spiritual disciplines. If you want to develop the strength to endure and nurture your children so they too can endure in the

ways of peace, justice, and the Beloved Community, then it will take commitment, effort, discipline, and teaching and training. Convenient Christianity is over – at least it is if you want to endure. And it means learning and practicing the deep disciplines of faith, which sustains us in the face of bigotry and hatred.

When an old friend of mine, was a young man, he told a tough, veteran Catholic nun, who ran a homeless shelter in New York City, he was having trouble praying and asked if she might have advice for him. She said, “First, shut the hell up. And second, it ain’t about you.” In other words, deepening our lives in Christ means that sometimes we must learn to listen to Christ and put aside our own jabbering and our own agendas. Go deep. Dan Berrigan used to say, “Call on Jesus when all else fails. Call on Him when all else succeeds (except that never happens).”

- 3) **Never travel alone.** We follow Jesus in community. We will not endure as isolated individuals going our own way. To endure and live out the Beloved Community means we have to stick together in ways we never dreamed of before. It means showing up for one another, supporting one another, praying for one another, spending time with one another, and learning to trust one another. It means cutting one another some slack, showing mercy, and patience, and practicing a lot of forgiveness. Over the long haul, it means we might not have anyone else but God and one another.

This is something we really have to work at during Covid. Covid has us scattered and isolated, so I encourage you to find ways of getting together – in small groups, on your porch, at the park, drink coffee, have a picnic,

meet in the church prayer garden. Practice social distancing and wear masks, meet outside but find ways to support and pray with each other. Meanwhile those of us on the church staff and church council are thinking of safe ways we can be together.

- 4) **Make friends along the Way.** Or to use New Testament language – we are to practice hospitality. Hospitality in the Bible is about receiving the stranger, the other, and being open to how God comes to us through unlikely friends. If we only have conversations with others like ourselves, who live in our own bubbles and social media world, and do not listen and learn from immigrants, outsiders, and those who are different, we are in danger of missing out on God and therefore losing our way and more, losing our souls.

This is why is of such importance for white people like me to be friends with people of color, and people from other places, and for straight people like me to be friends with LGBTQ folks. Hear me clearly: We cannot hear God when we only listen to ourselves and to people just like us. God's speaks to us in various ways and much of that is through others unlike us.

- 5) **We are not in control.** Most things going on in this world we can do nothing about. Old activist priest Dan Berrigan use to suggest, “When traveling on an airplane, watch the movie, but don't use the earphones. Then you'll be able to see what's going on, but not understand what's happening, and so you'll feel right at home, little different than you do on the ground.” In other words, lighten up about trying to be in control and solve every problem. The world is confusing, chaotic, and full of change. And remember, that just because there is nothing you can do, does not mean

nothing is being done. God works in all kinds of way through all sorts of people.

- 6) **Learn to say “No.”** In April of 1938, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a Confirmation sermon in which he said, “Your ‘yes’ to God requires your ‘no’ to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor, to all ungodliness, and to all mockery of what is holy. Your ‘yes’ to God requires a ‘no’ to everything that tries to interfere with your serving God alone, even if that is your job, your possessions, your home, or your honor in the world (“The Gift of Faith” in *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp. 201-206).

Knowing when to say “yes” and when to say “no” is about discernment. And discernment comes with daily immersing ourselves in the Living God and the things of the Living God. William Stringfellow believed discernment was the most important gift of God, for it enables us to see and notice the difference between portents of death and signs of the resurrection.

Saying “yes” and “no” is also about resistance. As Bonhoeffer says, “Saying ‘yes’ to God requires your ‘no’ to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor, to all ungodliness, and to all mockery of what is holy.” We are called to resist such things.

But saying “no” also means resistance to cynicism, bitterness, and the kind of anger that can easily turn into rage and hatred. Do you hear me?

7) **Celebrate.** Laugh, eat together as much as possible, play music, and practice Sabbath. Jesus was accused by the Religious Powers of being a drunkard and a glutton and hanging out and having a good time with people of questionable morals; every time we turn a page in the Gospels Jesus seems to be at a table eating with others, just leaving a table, or on his way to a table. Meals and partying are ways we enjoy and give thanks for God's gifts of good food, good friends, and good music; along with practicing Sabbath these are reminders that it is not all up to us. It's up to God and we can trust that God is at work, even when we're not.

Again, during Covid this is another big obstacle. But as I said before, in small ways, outside, spread out, we can get together to practice sabbath, eat together, and celebrate.

8) **Think little.** In a world consumed with "bigness," Jesus did lots of little things like breaking bread, listening to children, healing persons, and talking about yeast and mustard seeds. His disciples worked little jobs and came from small towns. The Powerful were obsessed with Rome and getting Caesar elected. Meanwhile, the salvation of the world came through Jesus who was born in a stable on the other side of the tracks in a tiny town. The testimony of the faithful across the centuries is that God works through the little, the local, the ignored and the marginalized. And the long-haul journey is taken by thousands, even millions of small steps, and usually by small communities of faith, who have learned to be patient with small steps.

9) **Embrace weakness.** We learn to trust the power of weakness and to see through the weakness of power. There are some things we cannot do if we

are faithful to the suffering servanthood of Jesus. Power constricts us from being like Jesus. Furthermore, when things are going well, we are careful and humble and remember that what looks like good news to the powerful is most likely not God's good news in Christ. At the same time, we do not give in to despair when things go badly because we know God is still at work and the end is not yet.

10) **Learn to say “and.”** My friend Sam Wells, rector of St. Martin in the Fields in London, says that we must learn to ask, “What is the worst thing that can happen?” He suggests that we consider that question and come up with some answers and accept them. But then we always ask a second question: “*And* what would happen then?” Wells says that this second question is God's question. The story is not yet over; the journey is still in front of us. This small “and” is a word of hope that though things look bad and perhaps evil has done its worst, God still has one more word.

Let me be frank. When we found out our building was going to collapse in upon us, we would not have rebuilt if we did not believe that God still had another word to speak. If we were not a people of hope we would have simply shut down the church, sold the property to a convenience store, and go live in the mountains in Canada or somewhere. For us to rebuild, in the middle of Covid, is an audacious act of hope. It is an act of faith. We are building for the long haul.

And it is hope and faith that believes that all of us together can “raise the roof” and pay for it.

Rabbi Hugo Gryn, who died in 1996, was one of the most respected rabbis in the U.K. When he was a boy, he and his family were in Auschwitz. And even though, it meant even greater danger, his father insisted that they observe the Sabbath and all festivals. Hugo said he never forgot that at the beginning of Sabbath, right there in Auschwitz, his father would take a piece of string and put it in a tiny bit of butter and light it to make a *shabat* candle. Hugo said he remembered being furious at his father protesting, “Father, that is all the butter we have!”

His father said, “Without food we can live for weeks. But we cannot live for a minute without hope” (from Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, p. 132).

So, Austin Heights, catch our breath, take a sabbath rest, prepare ourselves – for the long haul goes on.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.