

Don't Give Up: Ten Commandments for the Long Haul (Again)

Jeremiah 29:4-9; Hebrews 10:23-25, 32-36; 12:1-3, 12-13

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Don't give up! That's the message this morning. Our calling in Jesus Christ is to keep going. Whether it is sunny and pleasant or stormy and cold, whether the climate is kind and gentle or harsh and unpleasant, our calling is to persevere.

After the week we've had, I know that many of us feel like, to paraphrase the Dude Lebowsky, "Forget it! I'm going bowling."

But there is a saying from the rabbinical tradition, "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." So, this morning I want to encourage us to stay with the work and the life to which we have been called. To not give up.

The letter to the Hebrews was written to a small community of Christ barely hanging on. Internally they were beset by disagreements about worshiping angels and wanting to go back to old religions or give up on Christ altogether. The author exhorts the readers to deepen their lives in Christ and to persevere. To use the language of Isaiah, they are urged to root their lives deeply in the Living God so they might mount up with wings as eagles, and if that doesn't work, then run and not be weary, and when all else fails, to walk and not faint. Just don't quit.

Which is also what the prophet Jeremiah is telling the Jewish exiles in a foreign land. False prophets and fancy preachers are telling the people that exile

will be short, and in no time at all, they'll all be back to the good old days, when everything was good and stable and comfortable.

Jeremiah has the difficult vocation of telling them the truth. Exile – being in a land you don't recognize, in a country perhaps you thought you knew but woke up and realized that it is a meaner, more racist, more suspicious, more angry, and more afraid than you knew. Jeremiah says to survive in such a strange land, is not going to be easy and it is going to take a while. So, he says, put down roots. Put them down deeply, build houses, and raise families. But – and here's the but – make sure that the roots are deeply in God and in God's people. Make sure the homes you build are rooted in God, the children you raise are rooted in God because if you are not intentional, disciplined, and committed to training your families in the faith, then you will wake up one day and your children will be just as mean, racist, suspicious, angry, and afraid as the surrounding culture. You're going to have to work at this and it is going to take some time. You need to learn to persevere.

I tell this with permission. Grace and Mollie Garrigan and Callie were recently talking and comparing notes on their upbringing. They said they learned to not think twice about getting up on Saturday morning and together go and pick up trash alongside a road, along with Emily, Katie Rushing, and others. Or getting up to walk the Alzheimer's Memory Walk or any number of other acts of service that taught them to think of helping and serving others. In college they thought it weird that other kids had not had a high school retreat at the World Hunger Farm in Waco where they learned how to eat by trading rice for water or beans, where they learned to live like people in other parts of the world.

Listen to me. Living in a hostile world, living in exile, is not for the faint of heart. It will take courage, it will take all of us together in God, and it will take grit and determination, and we won't make it if we're not prepared. Here are suggestions and insights for being sustained on the journey. Here are my Ten Commandments for the Long Haul (Again):

- 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 in 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 the Beloved Community.
- 2) **Get in shape.** Long haul journeying means getting in proper condition so we can endure. 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. It means showing up, showing up, showing up. Let me say it one more time – it means showing up. And going deep. 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, working in a major city homeless shelter run by no nonsense Catholic nuns, during a break he spoke to one of nuns about his difficulty with praying. The nun was short and tough, with a Bronx accent. She said there are two things you need to know about prayer, “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. Old Catholic activist 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 (there’s that phrase again) for one another, supporting one another, praying for one another, spending time with one another, and learning to trust one another. And this is one of the reasons we eat together. 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.
- 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. We are all pilgrims on the journey, and if we only have conversations with others like ourselves, live in our own bubbles and social media world, and do not listen and learn from immigrants, outsiders, and those who are considered different, we will be in danger of missing out on God and therefore losing our way and more, losing our souls – losing our humanity.

It also means providing safe spaces for anyone in need. It means that we practice the Beloved Community now, here in this place and in our shared life together. Hear me clearly: This is a safe space. This is a safe space for those of you who are Trans, who are LGBTQ. This is a safe space for those of you who are mixed race or people of color. This is a safe place for anyone whose citizenship is in a different country.

This is why we are seeking to practice New Testament hospitality by creating the Casa Peregrina or Pilgrim House which would house a documented pilgrim or migrant until they get on their feet and have work permits and a place of their own. But these days, it seems that simple compassion is suspect. To be merciful is risky. Therefore, to do this ministry, we are making sure we have all our “t’s crossed and i’s dotted.” There is risk, but almost everything Austin Heights ever attempted was risky: time after time we did not have enough money, or we did not have enough people, or we were going to provoke those with Power. We are going to make sure we are prepared if the Powers come after us. The good news is we are not alone. We’re being advised by congregations who are already doing this, and Fellowship Southwest has legal counsel to advise us and has ready a \$10,000 grant with our name on it.

- 5) **We are not in control.** Most things going on in this world we can do nothing about. 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. Furthermore, I believe that the work of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, is to help us be comfortable with discomfort.

Learning to accept that we are not in control is what the church has called patience. Patience enables us to keep doing what we can, where we can, when we can, without becoming demoralized that we can’t do everything that needs to be done. Besides, part of following Jesus is learning that not everything is a problem to be solved. Some things are mysteries into which we are invited to enter and abide.

- 6) **Learn to say “No.”** After my ordination many years ago, the old and wise preacher whispered to me, “You’re going to have to learn to say ‘No,’ and ‘Hell, no!’” which startled my young pastoral ears. After nearly forty-five years, I know he was right. And saying “no” is not about boundary keeping. It’s about speaking a loud “Hell no!” over injustice and racism, bigotry and violence, and meanness and fear. Practicing saying “No!” and “Hell, no!” is another word for resistance.

I remind you that yesterday, Nov. 9, was the 86<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht, the beginning of the Holocaust. Not only were Jewish synagogues destroyed, as well as Jewish businesses and homes and cemeteries, the Nazis felt free to persecute Jews openly because no one said anything. And the Nazis began to arrest and deport Jews to camps.

In 1940, on the day after France surrendered to the Nazis during World War II, Andre Trocme, the pastor of the small Protestant congregation in the little village of Le Chambon in southern France, stepped into the pulpit and proclaimed: “The responsibility of Christians is to resist the violence that will be brought to bear on their consciences through the weapons of the spirit.” Trocme was saying that this is a spiritual fight, and not only material. The powers of hate destroy the soul as well as the body. They attack the conscience, too. They attack the soul.

The way we resist is by the non-violent Weapons of the Spirit as the Apostle Paul says in Eph. 6:10-20. Without immersing ourselves deeply in God and the Weapons of the Spirit, we’ll slowly be worn down to where we’re as angry as everyone else, or we’ll become suspicious like everyone else, or – more likely – we get used to moral outrages, we become numbed, and we don’t say anything, or we look the other way. And one day we look up and we have lost our humanity. So we resist, resist, resist!

Besides the Christian Bible and immersing themselves in the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus, Pastor Andre Trocme taught his people these words from the Jewish Talmud, “Whoever preserved the life of a single soul, it is as if he had preserved an entire world.” Hence, the people of Andre Trocme’s small congregation in Le Chambon, France provided safe space, for Jews, sheltering them from the Nazis, and they smuggled them across the mountains to safety in

Switzerland. After the war, someone counted and that small town, and that small congregation had saved over 5,000 Jews. Those were people who because they had said “Yes!” to Jesus, knew how to say “No” and “Hell, no!” They knew how to resist, and they did so risking their very lives.

- 7) **Practice joy.** It is essential, even in difficult times and in exile, that we laugh, eat together as much as possible, play music, dance, and practice Sabbath. Jesus was accused by the Religious Elite 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. That’s why we need to plan an Austin Heights night at the brewery and when Dilly-Dally opens, we want to have frequent Austin Heights gatherings there.
- 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. While the Powerful were obsessed with Rome, the salvation of the world comes 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.

Andre Trocme told his small congregation as they faced the Gestapo, “Every day look for opportunities to make little moves against destructiveness.” And I am convinced that it is through these little moves against destructiveness that God works bringing about goodness and justice and mercy in ways we do not yet see.

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 says that we must learn to ask, “What is the worst thing that can happen?” and learn to face it, accept it, and come up with some answers. But then we always ask a second question: “*And* what would happen then?” 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.

Hope has nothing to do with optimism and nothing to do with how we feel. Hope is a commitment and discipline. The Apostle Paul tells us at the end of I Corinthians 13, “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three.” And all three are commitments and decisions we make, not emotions. We can feel discouragement, even despair but still go on in hope, because our hope is rooted in the Living God, who has not finished with the last word, and who has not finished the work.

Young climate activist Tarana Burke says, “Having hope and maintaining hope is a chore. And that’s something we should be honest about. Right, it’s work. It is not easy to be hopeful all the time. That’s the beautiful part about having people around you who are encouraging and who are constantly reminding you that you are built for this moment, that you are meant for this moment, that you’re right for this moment” (cited in *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*, p. 2).

In the book of Esther, when the Jews are facing genocide at the hands of the empire, Esther is told, “Who knows? It is perhaps for such time as this that you are here to make a difference” (Esther 4:14).

Austin Heights perhaps for such time as this we are here. Since 1968, when we were founded, we were being prepared for this moment. We were built for this, and there are scared, suffering people who need us and the Lord God knows we need each other.

So we don’t give up! We don’t give in! We don’t back up. We don’t back down. Together we keep going. Together we never, ever, give up!

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

of us all. Amen.