

The ten commandments is a story many of us have heard and even seen over and over again – from Sunday School to the big screen – we’re all more or less pretty familiar with it.

Up to this point in the story in Exodus we have been following Moses, God, and the Israelites through the wilderness. It has not been an easy journey for them since they left the celebration on the banks of the Red Sea after God helped them reach safety from the Egyptians. The people have been quarreling with Moses and questioning God. God has continued to provide the people's basic needs of food and water, but still there are disagreements and general grumpiness and Moses has about had it with being the leader of this not-so-merry bunch. Before the commandments were received Moses had already been back and forth up the mountain delivering messages from God to the Israelites in preparation. Then the Lord tells Moses I will come to you in a thick cloud so the people will hear me speaking and therefore trust you. And sure enough, on the third day thunder and lightning comes, a loud trumpet blast is heard, there is fire and smoke, and an earthquake and a thick cloud covers the mountain. God is here folks, it doesn't get anymore intimidating, anymore real, anymore terrifying and life transforming than this. God is here; we better listen. So Moses leads the people to the base of the mountain to hear what God has to say. And then God speaks...loudly and clearly...the words Kirsten read for us this morning.

With God's own booming voice, God tells the people what is expected of them. What is expected of us. The commandments are more than a list of rules given to straighten these quarreling folks out. They are a means to form and nurture an alternative community, a community bound by loyalty to a god who has chosen to redeem a group of slaves from a life of bondage. The commandments are given to create a community where human beings can live fruitful, productive, and meaningful lives before God and with one another.

The first words of the text spoken by God claims “I am the Lord your God...you shall not put *anything* before me” – the last commandment ends with the words “your neighbor.” Do not put anything before God --- look after, cherish, respect, love your neighbor. Life according to the commandments is fundamentally about radical commitment to God and compassion for the neighbor. The Commandments are intended to create a community that cultivates a deep and enduring love for and loyalty to God, which then extends out to all creation.

God’s instruction addresses these two realms of life – the people’s relationship with God and their relationships with one another. The first four instructions have to do with relationship with God; the last six with human relationships. Both are necessary for a healthy faith, but the order in which the instructions are given makes it clear that our relationship with humanity depends upon our relationship with God.

Love God, love one another. We hear it again in Matthew when Jesus is asked “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” The Law being referred to is the Torah which describes 613 laws. Determining the most important law was often a debate between scholars and priests during Jesus’ time. Jesus’ first response would not have surprised the listeners, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” But then Jesus continues mentioning another, “*The second is like it*: Love your neighbor as yourself.” This one would have been more of a surprise to those who listened to Jesus. Love your neighbor should be like loving God? The words, “the second is *like it*” suggests that our love for others should be like our love for God. As if one cannot exist without the other. They go hand in hand. Our love for our neighbor should be like our love for God. Meaning, our love for God *and* for humanity should be more than just a feeling – it should mean adhering to a covenant – it means our love should result in willing

and doing – it means we aren't supposed to simply sit down and emit feelings of love for God and for others -- radiate these lovey dovey positive thinking feelings. It means we put our love into action. It means we love God *and* our neighbor through our words *and* our actions. With our whole selves.

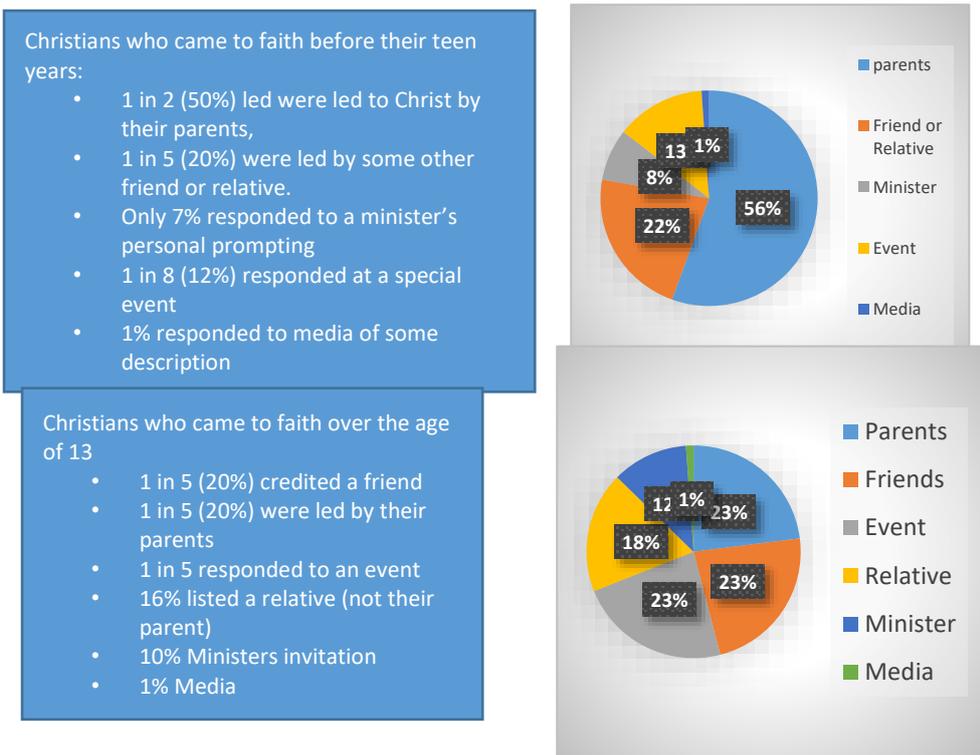
Now the words “our neighbor” is familiar. We've heard it before; we've used it before. Which often is followed by the question, who is our neighbor? *Are you my neighbor?* Is my neighbor the one living next door? The stranger? The enemy? All of the above?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian who wrote before and during WW2 speaks of loving our neighbor. He first asks the question, “Who is God?” and responds by saying that we get to know who God is by encountering Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ says Bonhoeffer, exists for the sake of others. Having faith is participating in this “being there for others” that Jesus shows us. Therefore, says Bonhoeffer, “the transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbor who is within reach of any given situation” In other words, experiencing God, having a divine, sacred, out of this world moment is not impossible, it's what happens when we spend time with one another. It's what happens when we care for the neighbor within reach. It's what happens when we care and share life with one another. There are over 100 people within reach of you this morning. There's another group within reach at home and another at school and another group when we're out and about in town. And with social media, the internet, there's the whole world within reach.

Now, we're on week two of a series about sharing our faith. What does it look like, how do we do it? Richard discussed last week *why* we should do it. Today we consider the importance of sharing our faith through relationship with one another.

Sharing our faith is important; sharing our stories with one another is important. But it appears that how we share our faith is important and some means are much more effective than others in fostering the faith in other people. For example, what I'm doing right now, preaching, is shown to not be all that effective in individual faith growth. Things like Easter Camp or other special events are *not* that effective in having a long term impact on someone's faith. Which is interesting because we spend quite a bit of time and energy and resources on these things.

This past week I along with other staff and members of Leith attended the South Island ministry conference. For my Wednesday afternoon workshop I attended Matt Chamberlin's discussion on discipleship. He shared a few things with us like these graphs.



Now I don't want us to focus so much on the numbers because they aren't always consistent between studies. But what *is* consistent is the importance of relationships in fostering people's faith. And this is consistent not just in young people but across the ages. It's the friends, it's the parents and the relatives that have lasting impact on our faith journeys. It's some of the neighbors within reach.

Studies focusing on the millennial age group – a group that’s often pointed at as those who are steadily leaving the church and claiming to be spiritual without being religious – often show the desire to go underneath the surface into conversations that allow for discussing the deep and challenging questions to life in a complex culture. And these discussions don’t happen in preaching or special event moments but in the relationships.

A Barna study compared those who left the church and those who stayed and noticed that those who stayed were *much more* likely to have a close relationship with an adult inside the church – an adult *other than* the pastor, minister, or parent. This study focused on the 20 somethings group and pointed to the vital faith formation that happens in the teenage years that lead up to these 20 year old decisions. These relationships that allow for the opportunity to share faith through life journeying together become almost necessarily in faith development and growth. Authentic relationships with people from a spread of generations in the church seems to be a key faith anchor point.

We see the importance of sharing our faith through relationships from Jesus’ ministry, too. We see Jesus being intimate, being authentic and being vulnerable. We see Jesus connecting with people beyond his teaching and preaching by entering homes and sharing meals and even inviting some to travel with him and live life with him. Jesus shows us what it looks like to love God and love our neighbor. He shows us what it looks like to care for the neighbor within reach. He shows us what it looks like to share our faith through relationship. It looks like showing up, being present, sharing life – the good and the bad of life.

A lot of you know that I was a hospital chaplain for a while in the States. As a hospital chaplain, it was my job to be around people when they were at their most vulnerable. I walked in to the most sacred moments of life and death. So much time in the

classroom as I studied to be a chaplain was spent feeling anxious about what to *say* in a hospital room with a dying patient or in a waiting room with family about to receive difficult news. What to *say* in response to all the *why* questions we're always asked. What to say as we pray the last prayer a person may hear. But what we learn outside of the classroom...is that it is rarely what we say that matters. One particular night I spent hours with a family in a room as they cried, shared stories, prayed, sang around the bed of their loved one who was just admitted to the hospital with a poor prognosis. It was a day or two later when I saw one of the family members in the hospital cafeteria. I could feel him watching me and I saw it in his eyes that he was trying to place me. I smiled at him and saw his eyes change with recognition. He came to me and said "you're the chaplain, right?" "Yes." "Thanks for being there the other night." And he was off. Such an insignificant moment. But, I hold on to that very brief encounter to remind myself that my words aren't anywhere near as important as my presence. When we're present with someone going through a vulnerable time...going through a crises, they may not remember the words we said during a prayer...but they'll remember that someone was there to pray for them. They may not remember that we didn't have an answer to their difficult questions, but they'll remember that someone was there to listen as they asked them.

If you're a regular churchgoer you hear a lot of sermons in your lifetime and you can't possibly remember all of them. Sure there are one or two that stay with you for awhile but ultimately your faith likely isn't reliant on the 20-30 minutes of sermon you hear each Sunday. It, hopefully, helps for sure. But it's not necessarily vital. Our teens go to Easter camp and indeed encounter God in life changing ways but these once a year camps and special events can't possibly sustain our faith. It's who we go home with after camp. It's the relationships with those who are sitting next to us while we're listening to the sermon that

sustain us. That should sustain us. That are *needed* to sustain us. By following Christ's example we can share our faith through relationship in a way that sustains us.

Paul's letter to the Philippians says this in the message version:

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care*— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.”

Those are powerful words. That get at the heart of what it means be to others as Jesus is to each one of us. To be deep-spirited friends. To lend a helping hand to the neighbor within reach.

We all know how much we need one another or else we wouldn't be here. We'd stay home, worshipping by ourselves if we didn't understand the importance...if we didn't crave the connection with one another. The connection we get from living life together, sharing in the joys and sorrows, celebrating and mourning with one another, letting each other mess up while encouraging each other to keep going knowing we will mess up again. This is what's vital and this is what we want to invite others to participate in with us. Because it's through these relationships with one another that we encounter Christ.

I can't imagine my faith journey in New Zealand without Leith Valley church. I can't imagine my faith journey thus far without my church relationships. I can't imagine being a mother without being connected to church families who are family to me and my children. Many of you know by now that we're looking forward to having a third baby later this year. And I'm excited to bring this baby into this church family. Because I know that it's not just

Phil and I who will have an impact on this baby, and Micah and Lyla's faith journeys but it's many of you. The relationships my children have with you all is vital to their sustained faith.

So I challenge us, to remember that our words and our actions are a reflection on Christ. That the relationships we have with one another, those who are older than us, those who are younger than us are vital. That sharing life together and faith journeying together is what will sustain us.

God sets up a covenant with us, gives us these 10 commandments, not to make our lives difficult or make us feel guilty when we mess up. God gives us these commandments as an attempt to ensure that everyone feels loved – that everyone has the opportunity to be included, cared for, and worried about. When our neighbor becomes everyone who is within reach, God's love becomes impossible to avoid. When we allow our love for God to transform our relationships with *all* of humanity – God's compassion is experienced through our own compassion for one another.