

Ten Commandments for the Long Haul

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 13) 2016

Kyle Childress

Jesus and his disciples were in the big city of Jerusalem. Up on the hill, the highest point of the city was the Temple. It was quite a place: majestic, grand, big, and built to stand forever. What it stood for was the core of Jewish life – God’s stable presence, God’s protection, and a way of life that was considered eternal.

The country boys from Galilee were in awe. Star-struck by the majesty of it all, looking up, necks craning, pointing at this and that, Jesus nonchalantly says, “You know the days are coming when not one of these stones will be left upon another. This grand edifice will be in rubble.” Shocked, angry, incredulous, the disciples, respond with everything from “No! Impossible!” to “What do you mean?” to “When will this happen?”

Jesus goes on to explain that even this grand Temple and all that is symbolized was going to end. Furthermore, it would portend all sorts of turmoil, change, conflict – much of which will go in God’s name and in the name of religion. And you might as well get ready because if you continue to stick with my name – that is, if you continue to live like Jesus, then it’ll cost you. It’ll take sacrifice and there will be suffering. Things are going to change, so get ready. But remember this: You are not alone. So, don’t give up. Endure. Endure. Endure.

What Jesus is talking about is not the End. Not the Eschaton – not the last things. What Jesus is talking about here in Luke 21 is what we call the apocalyptic,

which means the revealing or unveiling so we see more clearly how things really are. In other words, don't take this life and all you've known, as you look up at the Temple, as the be-all and end-all of history. The truth is it is not settled and secure as you've thought. Plus, as your secure world tumbles down, it will be tough, but it is not the end.

You know the old saying that probably has made the rounds of social media: "In the end everything will be okay. If it is not okay, it's not the end."

Well, Jesus is saying everything is not okay but it's not the end. To get to the end we're going to have to learn to endure. To persevere.

Our reading from Isaiah 65 is a picture or image of the End. The last things. Or as theologian James McClendon used to say, the things that last.

In the midst of the chaos, look for the things that last and endure. In the midst of the turmoil God creates newness. This old life is passing away but something new is coming. There will be no more weeping and no more cries of distress from poverty and hunger and inadequate health-care. The elderly will live a full and good life, no longer cut-off due to disease or neglect. Infant mortality will be a thing of the past as children are given proper care and attention and health. Everyone will have a safe place and proper nutrition. And there shall be peace and truth and reconciliation. Creation is whole and protected and the wolf and lamb and lion will live together in harmony and no one will be threatened or intimidated. This is what Christians across the centuries have called a picture of the Beloved Community.

That's a picture of the End – the purpose and completion of what God wants and what God promises will come. We are called to invest our lives now, in these things of God, which will endure and last. The rest is all passing away. Our calling is to start living and practicing the Beloved Community now, because it is what will endure and last to the end.

To endure and last, is no small thing. And given the shaking of the foundations this week, we had better get ready. I'm not interested in talking about rival political parties and candidates and let's all come together and be nice to one another. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the resurgence of hate groups in our country and in East Texas. When the Klan and White Supremacist groups celebrate, then something is seriously wrong. Our friend and former church member, Jack Pennington, has friends who are a gay couple who found a handwritten note on their front door, which said, "You need to move faggots! Trump is President now!" There are multiple reports of Muslims being bullied, young female Muslims having their hijabs jerked. Young women and girls having obscene things said to them with the comment, "Trump is President now." Immigrants are afraid. Racism has become even more blatant. This is what the Bible calls apocalyptic – when we see things more clearly as they really are. As numerous people have said to me this week, "This country is different than I thought it was." Our temples are shaken and we can't believe it.

Discipleship is no longer abstract. Being followers of Jesus who invests 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 – in other words, the Beloved Community. This is long haul, long-term stuff. We won't make it if we're

not prepared. Here are suggestions and insights being sustained on the journey. Here are my Ten Commandments for the Long Haul:

- 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 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. 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, he told a veteran Catholic nun 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. 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. 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 different, we will be in danger of missing out on God and therefore losing our way and more, losing our souls.

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 LGBTQ. This is a safe space for those of you who are mixed race or people of color. This is a safe space for anyone of a different religion. We are followers of Jesus and because of that we do not coerce. We seek to embody the Beloved Community where we are safe.

- 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.

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 pastor ears. After nearly forty years, I know he was right. And saying “no” is not about boundary keeping and prioritizing time and tasks. 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.

On the day after France surrendered to Nazi Germany 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. 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 telling racist jokes like everyone else, where we’re suspicious of others we consider not like ourselves, and where we become blind to white supremacy. We will become mean and bitter, too. So we resist, resist, resist!

The people of Andre Trocme’s small congregation in Le Chambon, France provided safe space, the Beloved Community, 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 knew how to say “No” and “Hell, no!” They knew how to resist.

- 7) Celebrate. Laugh, eat together as much as possible, play music, 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.

8) Think little. In a world consumed with “bigness” or “bigliness,” 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.

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?” 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.

My friend Rick Lischer at Duke knows a Duke oncologist who specializes in some of the worst kinds of cancer. He is a world-class physician with a string of degrees and fellowships after his name. Like all professionals, he has a card. It has his name, but where you might expect a list of his degrees and even “I’ve been on ‘60 Minutes,’” he has only this in boldface type: “THERE IS HOPE.”

I wonder if it’s the *card* that keeps his patients going. It’s the *card* that brings them and their relatives back to his little clinic again and again. It’s the *card* that lifts their spirits when nothing else can. It’s the message on the *card* that keeps you and me on the long haul. I’ve thought about having a stack of them made for each of you to take into your places of service, workplaces and daily lives. I would mention only your name, the name of Jesus, and Austin Heights Baptist Church, and THERE IS HOPE.

With hope we can endure to the end. So don’t give up! Don’t give in! Don’t back up. 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.