

“WORKING THE PROGRAM”

Exodus 20:1-17 March 4, 2017

This is our third Sunday in our sermon series “Rehab.” We have been into the wilderness, moved into intervention, and this message today is about Program. In recovery support groups, the phrase “working the steps,” or “working the program” is used to describe how a participant goes through the process under the direct supervision of a sponsor. Likewise, in cardiac or other physical rehabilitation programs, there is a prescribed set of exercises and activities that the person goes through, a program the individual “works” also under the supervision of a trained specialist. So a fundamental component of rehab is that you need a program. A second critical component is you need others to support and encourage you as you work through it.

We want to suggest that the Ten Commandments is our ten-step program as followers of Jesus Christ. As such, we not only need to learn the steps, but we need to work them under the guidance and support of others. We work the steps of our program in the community of faith.

What is our program? Jesus summarizes the whole of it in two sentences: “One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28-31, NRSV). But here in the twentieth chapter of Exodus, we get the full program:

1. Worship only the Lord God.
2. Don't worship idols.
3. Don't take the Lord's name in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.
5. Honor your parents.
6. Do not commit murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not lie.
10. Do not covet what other people have.

This is our ten-step program as followers of Jesus Christ. And even though Jesus provides a convenient, two sentence summary, it is important for us to work the program throughout our lives. This is why our Ten Commandments are one of the first things we teach to our children. Following these commandments is about character. They are about what we stand for as people of God and as community members. These are the foundational principles for living in community with one another.

Can we do this? What gets in our way?

Lately, there has been a lot of talk about gun control. In the United States, we have watched so many mass shooting, two of them in Christian churches, and others in public spaces, non-Christian religious gatherings, and schools. Immediately following the mass shooting in Sutherland Springs, Texas, there were calls for church leaders and pastors to consider adopting security measures to ensure the safety of their church members. Some have even suggested training an armed security team, or that pastors arm themselves.

This is a difficult issue, and one in which people tend to be polarized

in their viewpoints. You know that as a congregation your leaders are trying to address these issues for us here in this community of faith. We all need to feel safe and secure as we worship, learn, and fellowship. Keeping folks safe is the priority for me. Locking the building during worship was difficult to swallow but necessary for the world we live in. We are in the process of discussing other measures—to keep us safe. They will not be as visible as locking the doors are but once again, the point is to keep us safe as we gather as the Body of Christ in this place at this time. One thing you do not have to worry about is your pastor being armed—that would scare us all!!

As we face these difficult questions as a congregation , it might be helpful for us to remember our ten-step program. Can we keep the Sabbath holy if we are carrying loaded firearms in worship? Are we willing to take a life in order to save the lives of others? How can we work our ten-step program together as a community of faith on this matter? And how can our ten-step program help us make decisions about other important, and often polarizing, matters that we face, as individuals and as congregations? How can our denomination's resources help us as we make decisions about security?

In the recent outcry by many women, some through the #MeToo movement, it suggests to us that we need to work the steps and have some serious conversation as members of Christian communities around what it means to commit adultery, or lie, or covet. How can our ten-step program help us to be accountable to one another and to honor one another as men and women?

Most people who begin a program face times when it isn't easy to keep going. They make mistakes. They want to quit. They break the rules. God is surely aware that as followers of Jesus Christ, we too will face times when

it isn't easy to follow the program. We make mistakes. We break the rules. There are times when we want to give up altogether. God surely knew these rules will be broken. But maybe following the commandments isn't about never breaking them. Maybe it is more about how we will stick to this relationship model with God and with one another.

Taylor said when he was starting cardiac rehab that he didn't believe he could do it. It felt impossible. He thought it might kill him. But at some point, he turned the corner and started believing he was going to live and that he could do it.

What makes people shift to starting to believe they can? Maybe it isn't about believing. Maybe it is about simply making a decision. Making a commitment to follow the regimen and deciding to trust in someone else, and follow the goals set by someone else for our benefit. At some point, we have to take that step of faith and just do it, whether we think we can or not, whether we are afraid or not, whether we think it might kill us or not.

The good news is that we don't have to be perfect, and we don't have to work the program alone. God promises to be with us in our journey. John Wesley asked his newly ordained ministers, "Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?" The answer the ministers were expected to give was a resounding "yes!" Responding with a "yes" isn't about our ability. It is about what God is able to do with us, and in us, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Yes! We do have faith in Christ. Yes! We are going on to perfection. Yes! We do expect to be made perfect in love in this life! But we don't do it alone. God perfects us in love as we live out our baptismal covenant and work the program together, enlivened and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do what we cannot do on our own.

As we mark the death of Billy Graham on Wednesday at the age of 99, we celebrate the many ways he impacted the nation and us. I believe he was a wonderful example of a man empowered by the Holy Spirit to do what none of us would have been able to do on our own. In an article written by Grant Wacker of the Washington Post, he quotes the journalist David Frost who asked the mature Graham what he would want the first line of his obituary to say. “That he was faithful and that he had integrity,” he replied. “And that I was faithful to my calling, and that I loved God with all my mind, heart and soul.” Frost wondered if Graham had questions he hoped to ask God in heaven. “Yes, thousands. Many things in Bible mysteries.” He then added, “Some things in my life I would be embarrassed if any one else saw. I would like God to edit the film.”

If God needed to edit the film of Billy Graham’s life, some readers undoubtedly thought, the rest of us were in big trouble. Here was a man who spent his life “working the program” and converted thousands to Christ. May we as His disciples be empowered to “work the program” as we search for a life lived closer and closer to Christ. Amen and amen.