

“The Ten Commandments”
Open Door MCC
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Watching The Ten Commandments this week surprised me in a number of ways, which surprised me. I've probably seen it a dozen times, starting when I was pretty little. I had some of the same questions I ever had, like what is God doing in the first-child-killing business, and what did those Egyptian horses ever do to anyone? And I had clear images in my head of certain scenes, like the one where Moses' staff turns into a snake and Ramses' pitcher of water has already turned into blood, and the one where Ramses places his dead son in the arms of that jackal god statue. But in the many years since I watched it last I'd forgotten how interminably long it is, and also that Spielberg probably totally stole his Indiana Jones and the Lost Ark angel of God special effects from DeMille's angel of death, and I realized that there are things about it that I never realized, because I think about things differently now.

For example.

The film is called The Ten Commandments, but the ten commandments take up about ten minutes of the film's 220 minutes. I think the scene where the old man is treading clay in the pit lasts longer than the Mt. Sinai mountaintop scene. In fact, the entire exodus takes up less than half the film, even if you factor in all the asking, and saying no, and plagues that happens before they leave.

I'd never noticed before that Eve and original sin got plastered over this version of the exodus story, because Ramses' heart doesn't get hardened by his own power or by that weird scriptural theology where God hardens Pharaoh's heart, but it happens because of the petty, scheming revenge of Queen Nefertiri (ravenously overplayed, as usual, by Anne Baxter). Because apparently men don't abuse power but are just puppets manipulated by calculating women. That was a bummer. I'd never noticed before all the brownface on the actors or all the white dresses or black dresses of the women, depending on which was the “good” or “desirable” one at the moment, all of which is wrong on many, many levels. Which was a bummer.

And I'd never thought critically before about Lilia, who they took care to say three or four times was with Dathan the overseer “of her own free will,” but who was clearly not with Dathan the overseer of any “own” or “free” or “will,” as I understand the definitions of those words. And it's a huge bummer to realize how little ground we have gained in 61 years in terms of understanding sexual consent as something more than the absence of “no, stop.” (Don't even get me started on that Cersei-Jaime Lannister scene in Game of Thrones season four.)

We've talked before about the similarities between the story of Moses and the story of Jesus. It's really obvious when Moses' story begins with a pharaoh's edict to kill all the male babies of a certain age, and then one of the Jesus nativitiesssss does that, too. And it's fairly obvious when Moses turns water into blood and makes a path through the sea and has God talk to him through a burning bush that doesn't burn, and then Jesus turns water into wine and makes a path on top of the sea and has God talk to him through a spirit that descends as a dove and as tongues of fire. But DeMille really ramped up the parallels with Jesus, and probably rightly so. DeMille's Moses raids the temple stores for grain, just like Jesus reaped grain on the sabbath. Moses and Jesus were both a prince and a peasant. Moses and Jesus both were victorious through the staff, not the sword. Moses and Jesus both led a motley band of raggle-taggle slave-types. Moses and Jesus both rejected the war stallions and military armor and

chariots. And DeMille's Moses totally came back down the mountain suddenly and unexpectedly and all Judgment Day, like a thief in the night, like No one knows at what hour the bridegroom comes, so keep your lamps lit, and so on.

As long as we take care to understand these similarities not as Moses presaging or foreshadowing or propheticizing Jesus, then they can be compelling parallels; as long as we recognize that they are about first-century writers mining the rich depths of Hebrew scripture for meaningful connections to their own Joshua, their own Josiah, whom they called Jesus. Because these stories are about more than just this one or the other, more even than about this one upstaging the other. These are stories about what it means to do God in the world, right? No matter whether we're watching The Ten Commandments or The Last Temptation, whether we're reading Exodus or Mark or, frankly, The Gospel of Biff, Jesus' Childhood Pal, we are learning what it means to this creator or to The Creator to Do God In The World.

And it is always time to do God in the world, but now more than ever, am I right? Not partisan, not DC politics, because trans women of color were dying in record numbers during Obama's administration. And Obama was deporting undocumented immigrants in record numbers. And Clinton signed the devastating Don't Ask Don't Tell law that set the gay folks back a decade who wanted to serve openly in the military. And it was Barney Frank ten years ago who took trans and genderqueer protection out of the employment protection bill that still never remotely got passed. And the prison industrial complex has been locking up black and brown people in disproportionate, unprecedented numbers for thirty years or more. It is always, always time to do God in the world for people who are vulnerable, the so-called foreigners and widows and orphans, the slaves of Egypt, so to speak, but my goodness, now more than ever.

And this leads us to what struck me most, perhaps, about my most-recent viewing of The Ten Commandments and this story, which is connected to the SURJ training that we had last week here at Open Door, and connected to white racial justice work in general or non-trans ally work against trans oppression, or how able-bodied and slim people do disability rights and fat-positive action, which is this idea of what it costs to do God in the world and what we get out of it. It's about how to be a leader and an activist and an ally without benefitting from it, without getting props and pats on the back, but more than that, in fact losing greatly, in fact having it cost us something expensive in terms of cache or power or privilege. It's about going from being a prince of Egypt to a slave. It's about being a leader without being a hero, without becoming a king.

In the last week or two, after this administration tweeted something about keeping trans folks out of the military (which the military rejected, root and stem, and which several branches of government actively spoke against), after that a meme popped up on the internet of Cpl. Klinger from M*A*S*H in a dress, with some scathing caption about the White House, posted usually by a non-trans ally. Trans and other gender-aware folks pointed out the problems with that character. If you aren't familiar with Klinger, he wasn't trans, but he dressed in "women's" clothes hoping to get a section 8, an old discharge for people deemed mentally unfit for service. Trans and other gender-aware folks pointed out that comparing trans folks to Klinger would unintentionally compare trans folks to being mentally unfit, and, or, being deceptive in order to evade military service, and, or, being men pretending to be women. Some of them posted a substitute picture of actual transgender servicemembers, like our own Erik or Karen. This conversation was happening all over the country, I had it from two or three different states in my FaceBook feed alone. But sometimes the non-trans ally people who posted the meme got upset that trans people weren't grateful, and, or, got defensive (for themselves or for Klinger, who I'll remind you is a fictional character on a t.v. show), and, or, verbally attacked the trans and other gender-aware folks

who pointed out the problem.

Earlier this year, a piece came out in *The Establishment* by Didi Delgado called “Whites Only: SURJ and the Caucasian Invasion of Racial Justice Spaces.” She criticized white-led anti-racism efforts as, among other things, centering whiteness and drawing resources away from Black Lives Matter and other efforts led by people of color. This is difficult criticism to hear, particularly by white folks who are trying to sort out what our responsibility is for racism and for ending it, trying to sort out how to be accountable to and led by people of color without expecting people of color to educate us or do all the work dismantling what white folks have built, maintained, and continue to benefit from.

Able-bodied people all the time will post stuff online where someone with a disability is portrayed as inspirational because they accomplished something even though they have a disability, and, or, someone with a disability is shown dancing at a wedding or suchlike with someone who is able-bodied in a way that is supposed to be touching, and, or, someone with a disability is shown as the object lesson and end-result and warning to others of some bad behavior, like smoking and a person with a breathing stoma. Memes will read, “The only disability in life is a bad attitude,” or show a child in a wheelchair and read, “What's your excuse?” And people with disabilities and other ability-aware folks will point out the problems, that these messages use human beings with disabilities as props, as inspiration, as things that make able-bodied people feel good about ourselves for feeling bad for them. And sometimes the able-bodied folks who posted or said the thing will get upset or get defensive or verbally attack the folks pointing out the problem.

And I could go on with other examples, and maybe you have examples of your own, either of being the one who pointed out a well-meaning person's error or of being someone who tried to be supportive and an ally only to be told that you are part of the problem. Who has such stories in the room? Exactly.

There's not an easy way to work this out, but there might be a kind of two-part formula or test or measurement to use if you are the person trying to be an ally in the given scenario. Part One. Q: Are you the person trying to be an ally in the scenario? No: Carry on. Yes: Shhhhhh. Listen. Does it feel bad to be told that you're part of the problem when you are trying to help? Sure. Now shush. Listen. Did you mean to be part of the problem? Probably not. I believe you. Shhhhh. Take it in. Learn from it. Unless you have already learned all the things, of course, and nobody has anything to offer you because you are the Three-Eyed Raven or God and have become omniscient. No? Then shhhhh, quiet.

Part Two. Q: Are you getting something out of whatever it is that you are doing as an ally-wannabe? No: Carry on, and sorry-not-sorry. That's how it's gotta be. Yes? That's a yellow flag. Even if the thing we're getting out of it is a good feeling, even a “doing the right thing” good feeling, that's a yellow flag. If you're getting your name in the newspaper for your ally-ship thing, that's a red flag. If you are getting awards, your red flag is on fire. It seems weird and counter-productive to say that doing the right thing as an ally or in solidarity shouldn't feel good and shouldn't be rewarding, I get it. And, still, that's just pretty much it. It probably shouldn't feel good, and it definitely probably shouldn't be rewarding. Because being in solidarity, honest to God solidarity, isn't a one-way act of charity or benevolence. It's an interdependent, interconsequential act of becoming by, with, through, for the other in a way that dissolves otherness, not by denying difference but by becoming difference.

Maybe. Let's keep talking about how to make sense of it.

But in the meantime the bottom line is pretty much that we need to not be getting something out of our acts of solidarity so much as losing something. Losing privilege. Losing prestige. Going from an

ancient prince of Egypt to an ancient Jewish slave. Going from a palace lord to a Midianite shepherd. And wandering in the desert, thirsty and hungry along with everyone else, for forty years. And never entering the land of promise. (Nevermind for a moment all the problems with the entire concept of a manifest destiny-y, occupation-ish, genocidal promised land. Let's just stick a pin in that for now.) But never entering the promised land. Never not wandering in the desert, thirsty and hungry.

Ultimately, at least in the film, Moses might have remained an Egyptian prince, and everyone who knew any different was either not talking or was murdering the people talking. His privilege and position was supported by the system, all he had to do was accept it. His adoptive mother protected his privileged position, his biological mother protected his privileged position, the senior pharaoh was all, Just promise you won't help the slaves and I'll totally believe you. He was given a dozen chances to just leave things the way they were. And that's the norm with privilege, not the exception. Privilege is its own reward, it tries repeatedly to assert itself and maintain the current status. And it's not squeamish, it doesn't care who gets hurt in the process. It doesn't mind violence. And you have to work to undermine it, to get rid of it. You have to cultivate a practice of rejecting it. You have to tend it constantly, and think about it all the time, and struggle with it, wrestle its old, old, ingrained grasp.

It seemed counterintuitive and counterproductive to talk about becoming an ally this way. It seems like we should be encouraging each other to just do it. To reap its rewards. To enjoy the joy and the privileges of denying privilege. That whatever it takes, however badly we come at it, our good intentions are enough, that trying at all is enough, that it's good to feel good about it.

But being an ally, being in solidarity is really hard, and we need to know it. Because doing it halfway can actually do more harm. Being a pretendo ally who is in it to feel good is part of the problem. Not listening to the people we want to support is part of the problem. Assuming that we know what's needed is part of the problem. Getting hurt and defensive when the people we want to support tell us what is needed and wanted is part of the problem.

We have to hate the problem more than we like feeling good. We probably won't get to enter Canaan; we shouldn't expect to or feel like that's our reward. We have to believe that the problem hurts us, too. Whether or not we really are a Jewish slave child or a prince of Egypt, any system built on hierarchy and difference can turn on any of us at any time. And we have to be prepared to go the distance: forty years, thirsty, hungry, pickle-less, and doing God in the world.

Peace.