The 125th Anniversary sermon
July 7, 2013

This morning's scripture readings are all about life in community and what makes it work. The first lesson expresses an appreciation of and gratitude for the bountiful land we are so fortunate to inhabit. The second lesson is about covenant, the tacit understanding of the ethical norms required to keep peace within communities. And the third lesson recognizes that, when you are a community built upon a hill, in full view so-to-speak, you also acquire certain responsibilities to be a model for others. Gratitude, Covenant, and Responsibility: three cornerstones of community life. This repeated focus on social life is central to the Hebrew scripture.

In fact, hidden in opening chapters of the Torah is a unique understanding of human beings as innately social creatures. The concept is implicit in the stories of Genesis and Exodus, but it is not formally spelled out and, therefore, is often overlooked. This deeply "relational" interpretation of human life is not only key to understanding the whole thrust of the biblical narrative, but is also critical, I believe, to our understanding of who we are. Therefore, I'm going to take us over some very familiar scriptural territory this morning, but, with a novel interpretation, that I hope will offer you a new way of thinking about life in community.

Beginning with the creation stories in Genesis, the social character of God is confirmed over and over again. The narrative makes it quite clear that the God of the Torah is one who seeks to have relationships with human beings, rather than living a self-indulgent existence far removed from mortal happenstance, like most ancient gods did. No, this God is different. This God is deeply committed to establishing a covenantal relationship with human beings and is endowed with the full range of feelings and emotions that go with social life: love, grief, anger, and forgiveness. God is by nature a 'social animal,' and we, created in God's image, are equally social in nature.

The Creation Story in the second chapter of Genesis spells out these relational attributes more precisely. Once Adam has been created out of the dust of the earth and situated in the luxurious Garden of Eden, God suddenly recognizes that "It is not good for a human being to be alone." The Hebrew language employed here implies that "solitude" is an unwholesome condition because it is "incomplete." Human beings are intended to achieve completeness (wholeness) through relationship.

So, God creates out of the ground every conceivable animal as possible companions for Adam. But, then God recognizes that animals are good, but not sufficient, companions for Adam. So God decides to give Adam a human helper as a partner. The word 'helper' here is the same word used to describe God's relationship to Israel, not a subordinate relationship, but one of mutual support. Likewise the word 'partner' means **"**fulfilling, making whole, making complete." And this 'partner,' in particular, is not made out of the earth, but from Adam's rib: "bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh", declares Adam. That is, in effect, Adam's cry of elation, his liberation from solitude, the fulfillment of his God-given nature, his completeness in relationship. And the two of them become "one flesh" both figuratively and literally. The Adam and Eve story is all about the nature of human life: "To be" is "to be in relationship." And the purpose of life? Human existence is intended for bonding with God, and with all God's creatures.

In Genesis chapter 6-9 (The Story of the Flood), God's faithfulness to relationships is reaffirmed. Early in the story God becomes distraught with humankind because they just don't seem to understand their relational raison d'etre and continuously distance themselves from their loving creator. It grieves God "to his heart" and God decides to "blot them out from the earth" by sending the great flood. But, this intrinsically relational God can't bear to exterminate the whole human race and decides to save a remnant. When the flood has finally wrought its devastation, God, with a renewed hope that humans will finally get the message, seeks to demonstrate more clearly his commitment to the relationship by establishing a definitive covenant with the remnant. First, God makes a profound covenantal promise: "Never again will I abandon you to the waters of chaos." And then just in case they don't get it, God adds a concrete sign of his steadfast love: "Here is tangible evidence of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature, for all future generations. I will set my rainbow in the sky, that it may be a sign of the covenantal relationship between me and the earth." The wording of this covenant is uniquely relational. God, in effect, promises to be with humankind in the whirlwind with steadfast faithfulness. The Hebrew word used for faithfulness is 'hesed,' a word that also means love and compassion. This is the second confirmation of the fundamentally relational nature of God and God's intention for the whole creation.

But humans will be humans. And, eventually, God had to step in again, not only to assert once more God's fidelity to the relationship, but also to spell out briefly and simply a set of reciprocal commitments we humans need to make in order

to sustain the relationship. As the Book of Exodus tells us, the Jews had escaped from Egypt and wandered in the desert for 40 years, again distancing themselves from God. Maybe, just maybe, God thought, a few simple relational principles will wake them up to their God-given nature. So in a truly kind and benevolent attempt to spell out in writing the particulars of a mutual relationship, God calls Moses to the top of Mt. Sinai and gives him the two tablets engraved with 10 simple guidelines.

According to Rabbi Gershen Winkler the Decalogue is a sadly misunderstood and misinterpreted body of ancient aphorisms that have been mistranslated and twisted out of context by religious cultures that were unfamiliar with the original Hebrew language. Nowhere in the entire Hebrew tradition are those ten aphorisms ever called the "Ten commandments." In Hebrew they are sometimes referred to simply as "two tablets of the covenant." In the classical Jewish mystical writ known as the Zohar, they are called simply ten "suggestions." At other times they were described as "ten of the resonances," meaning that they were viewed as ten behavioral norms that resonate with all the others recorded in the Torah, but were especially important in maintaining a relationship of mutual respect with the creator.

Likewise, nowhere in the Decalogue does it state "Thou shalt not." What it actually says is, "you would not." In other words the Decalogue is saying that, if you really understand the relational nature of your being, that is your relationship with God and all God's creatures, then "you would not" be likely to commit murder, sexual abuse, theft, slander etc.

So, in covenantal terms, the so-called Ten Commandments are the reciprocal agreements that we humans promise to practice as our response to God's faithfulness to the covenantal relationship. Just as we agree in the marriage covenant to certain mutual responsibilities in order to sustain the relationship over time.

As Walter Brueggemann says, the Old Testament is a story about the constant negotiation between God and Israel to sustain a relationship of mutual fidelity**.** ["Constant negotiation to sustain a relationship of mutual fidelity" sounds a lot like the history of Twilight Park, doesn't it?] In the Torah the covenant relationship is broken and remade over and over again. And God is gracious and

steadfast enough in his love and compassion to remake the covenant again and again. Therefore a covenantal relationship is never cast in cement; it is subject to constant negotiation. That's what the relentless interpret-tations in the Book of Leviticus are all about and what Judaic commentators continue to debate to this date.

Jesus was equally emphatic about the relational nature of our being and refers to it whenever he is asked to sum up his message. His Summary of the Law is a case in point. Being consistent with the narrative we have just explored, let's substitute the word "relationship" for the word commandment. Then Jesus' Summary of the Law reads as follows:

You should love the lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great relationship. The second is like unto it: You should love your neighbor as yourself. On these two relationships hang all the law and order of the universe.

That translation of the Summary of the Law has the power to change your whole outlook on life. It's that profound.

It also sounds like a very simple statement, but it has myriad implications that most of us have never entertained. First, it defines human beings as intrinsically relational: 'to be" is "to be in relationship," in relationship with God, neighbor, and all that is.

Second, if all the law and order of the creation depends on these relationships, then relationships must be the governing principle of the universe**.** And each of us is an integral part of an infinite web of relationships called creation. Therefore, the law and order of the whole magnificent universe depends to some degree upon our conscious practice of right relationships.

Third, there are at least two ways to read the phrase 'love your neighbor as yourself.' Normally it is read "*like* you love yourself," which is difficult enough. But a second reading is even more challenging: "love your neighbor *as if she were* yourself," that is, as if she were actually part of who you are and you are able to know and feel her pain and suffering as intimately and concretely as you know and feel your own.

Fourth, the Aramaic word for love ('racham') used in the Summary of the Law shares the same root as the word "womb." In other words Jesus was asking us to

feel towards our neighbor as a woman does toward the fetus in her womb, as if the neighbor were literally part of us, as the fetus is part of the woman. To take it one small step further, you might say we are being asked to identify with one another as if we were one in the same, fully part of one another.

So Jesus' Summary of the Law is one of the most radically relational propositions ever devised. But all of Jesus' major teachings, the summary of the law, servant leadership, and the Kingdom of God, have the same relational ring to them.

He supposed that, once we had grasped our innate bond with one another, we would also recognize that serving each other was the natural and joyful thing to do. So that is why he told his disciples over and over again in both words and deed that service was their natural role in life. Likewise, service is the key to the strength and endurance of this community. The kind of dedicated service, symbolized this morning by the participation of former Park presidents, is what has held this community together for 125 years. We are all servants of one another. It is the life blood of Twilight Park.

And, finally, the Kingdom of God, of which Jesus spoke so often, was that once and future time when we finally get the message and understand fully that our God given nature is to love one another as God has loved us. The Kingdom of God was for Jesus the long anticipated fulfillment of the relational communion that God intended from the beginning. And so it should be for us.

In the end, the whole biblical narrative, hangs on one very simple ontological premise:

Right relationships are everything!!!!