Pentecost 2 Proper 6

June 14, 2020

Exodus 19:2-8a

Pretty much every app I load onto my phone or my tablet comes with the requirement to accept the terms and conditions the developer has attached to using their product. These are usually long documents with lots of legal terminology about not trying to cheat or use the app for illegal purposes, and information about how they can use the data we generate by using the app.

I honestly can’t remember the last time I actually read through the terms and conditions before clicking “I accept.”

As a reasonably intelligent and responsible human being, I know better. But after skimming over them in the past, I’ve just started assuming that I know what’s included in the agreement, and that someone else would read them and have a fit if something really egregious was included, so I just tap “I accept” and move on with my life.

But the truth is, I don’t know what’s included in there. Still, I accept the terms of the agreement, based on previous experiences with such things.

That’s basically what the Israelites do in our reading from Exodus today. God reminds them of the covenants God has made in the past by calling them the “house of Jacob,” and reminds them of how God has provided for the people in the desert. So when Moses tells them what God has said – “If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples….a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” – the people essentially say, “OK. We’re good with that.”

But God hasn’t told them what it means to obey his voice. It’s only *after* they agree that the people begin to receive the Law, beginning with the Ten Commandments.

Given that much of the rest of the Old Testament is full of stories recounting a cycle of obedience, then disobedience, then prophets expressing God’s displeasure, followed by the people promising to do better….perhaps they should have asked a few questions before saying, “we accept your terms and conditions, God.”

We can assume that, because the people knew the history of God’s promises, had experienced for themselves how God provided for them by freeing them from slavery and providing food and water as they made the journey from Egypt to Mt. Sinai, perhaps they felt comfortable accepting what God said without knowing what they were agreeing to do.

But perhaps they also trusted that God would not break God’s promises, even if *they* weren’t always good at being faithful. And maybe this also tells us that the people trusted their relationship with God was not conditional upon *their* behavior, but instead rooted in God’s unending love for them and in their trust that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.[[1]](#footnote-1)

And because of that trust, because of the existing relationship they had with God, perhaps they felt confident that they could agree to keep the covenant, confident that, were they to fall short, God would keep God’s promise anyhow.

I thought about all this yesterday, as I joined in an online celebration of the ordination of a colleague and recalled my own ordination 5 years ago. I made a lot of promises that day, knowing that I would not always keep them, and that, in all likelihood, I would fail spectacularly at keeping them on occasion.

But I made them knowing that I would *try* to keep them, and that I trusted that God would bless my efforts along the way, and forgive me when I fell short.

Because that’s what we do. Each of us, on a daily basis. We wake up in the morning and we navigate our days. We don’t consciously think, “OK, this morning I’m going to break my baptismal promise to live my life following the example of Jesus, but this afternoon I’ll pay more attention to my promise to hear the Word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper.”

Instead, just as the Israelites did during their time in the wilderness, just as the people of God have done ever since, we choose over and over to worship God and not earthly things, to keep the commandments, to live our lives in ways that are pleasing to God, and honor God’s gift of grace. But when we fall short, we suffer the consequences of our human limitations, and we recommit ourselves to worshiping God.

I do not expect that any of this is a surprise to God.

God could have created us to be perfect. Why God chose not to is one of the mysteries of God’s creation. Whatever the reason, we were not created as perfect creatures. We were not created as beings who would find it easy to *not* be sinful. We were created as humans who are capable of communication, and reason and logic, and hope and wonder, who can remember their history, and who can, by virtue of all that, understand our place in creation and our need for God’s mercy and love.

Because we are not perfect, we are invited into a covenantal relationship with our Creator that tells us that it’s not what *we do* but what *God has already done and will continue to do* that assures our salvation. If it were up to us, that’d be works righteousness, and we might live in fear that God could decide we just aren’t good enough and never will be.

Instead, because of this covenantal relationship, we are invited to respond through worship and obedience, trusting that God will continue to provide for us.

And when we make that choice to worship God and obey God’s commands, we have abundant life, life where we understand our connection to each other and to all of God’s good creation. A life ordered by the Ten Commandments is one of honesty, faithfulness, and concern for the well-being of others, which allows all of God’s creation to thrive and flourish.

It is only the grace of God that makes this covenantal life possible. Where we are limited, where we are easily distracted and prone to placing ourselves before others, God blesses our efforts to be obedient, like Jesus did when he fed 5000 people from a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread. Where we are limited in our ability to worship and pray as we ought, the Spirit intercedes, turning our sighs too deep for words into prayers rising up like incense, and gathering us into one, even when we cannot all be together.

Thanks be to God for His unending mercy and grace. May it lead us to respond with lives of worship and obedience, trusting that God’s grace is sufficient for our needs.

1. Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Joel 2:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)