

SERMON TITLE: "Celebrating Our Tenth with Guidance"

SERMON TEXT: Psalm 119:97-112 (& Children's sermon on 10 Commandments from Ex. 20 & Dt. 5)

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: October 15, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

This fall we're kicking off a celebration of our tenth year here at this location. Our church began long ago, in 1870, in downtown Ogden. After a century of good ministry there, the congregation felt God's guidance to relocate. Then in 2007 and 2008, as this new building was being constructed, First United Methodists began doing what good Christian people always do. They looked around and asked, "What is God leading us to do here? How can we be of service in this new place?" Church members soon learned that a brand new Veterans nursing home was also being constructed just one mile north. Soon plans were underway to organize and stage the first ever Harvest Festival and Veterans Fun Run.

And so, yesterday was our tenth annual Veterans' Tribute Run and Chili Cook-off to raise funds for the recreation and quality-of-life activities at the Veterans Home. Thanks to all of you who participated and made our event successful. And, especially, thanks to Ray, Vern, Marty, Larry, and others of you who worked so very hard for many, many months to plan and organize.

No matter how many people show up as participants and volunteers on the day of the event, nothing that big happens without a huge amount of advance effort and attention to details. When everyone swoops in at the registration hour, there have to be structures to inform registrars what to do, and there have to be rules and course marshals to instruct runners when to start and where to go. Electric chip timers were used to ensure the highest accuracy and adherence to the contest rules. Prizes and the drawings were administered with very particular plans designed to guide the process smoothly. At the Red Cross blood donation bus, policies were followed about who could or couldn't donate. The bounce house had rules about what sized persons were allowed to jump. And the chili cooks had to obey Utah's strict food handler laws, so no one would get sick. All that regulation was in place to steer our

tenth annual Veterans Tribute Run and Chili Cook-off from a successful start to a fantastic finish. You could say that we were celebrating our tenth with guidance.

You could say that same thing about God's giving of the Ten Commandments. The Old Testament books of Exodus and Deuteronomy both tell us that God called Moses up on the mountain and carved those ten laws onto stone tablets so that the Hebrew people could succeed in their life. God wanted them to be healthy and happy, so God gave them rules to follow. Those ten laws, along with other instructions, came to define the Hebrew people. As we're living into our church's tenth year in this place, let's unpack the idea of celebrating our tenth with guidance.

1—LEARNABLE

Brenda and the children already reviewed the Ten Commandments with us, as those laws are found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. So, for this sermon, I'm going to direct our attention to Psalm 119. As you know, the book of Psalms was the Jewish hymnal, and Psalm 119 is a song that celebrates the guidance given by God's laws. An interesting fact about Psalm 119 is that it's based on the Hebrew alphabet. As the psalm is written in Hebrew, the first word of the first stanza begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second stanza begins with the second Hebrew letter, and each stanza of this long song begins with a successive letter. This A-B-C structure made this important and celebratory song easier for children to learn and for adults to remember.

So, one clear point of Psalm 119 is that celebrating our tenth with guidance is possible because God's will for us is *learnable*. How God wants us to live isn't some unknowable mystery. Just as our Sunday School kids learned the Ten Commandments through a variety of different methods, so we are able to read the Bible, listen to sermons, study lessons, attend classes, talk about, memorize, review, pray about, and learn what God wants for us to do.

It's a truth that academic learning is easier for some people than for others. And it's often easier for children and youth to learn and remember than it is for older adults. But, due to our richer life

experiences, we older adults often pay closer attention and thus have our own advantages for learning. Like anything else, learning God's will for our lives is usually more successful when we put our hearts into it, as well as our brains. Verse 103 suggests that, when we taste that God's precepts are sweeter than honey, God's guidance will stick with us longer. And when keep and practice God's laws in real life situations, that will definitely reinforce our mental concentration and learning.

On Tuesday morning, I read the *Pickles* comic strip in the newspaper. *Pickles* is about an older couple. Sometimes the strip includes their young grandson Nelson. On Tuesday, as Nelson was sitting on the porch next to his grandpa, he said, "I wish I were old and wise like you, Grampa." Earl turned toward him and responded, "Oh, you do, huh?" In the third frame, a close-up of Earl emphasized his elderly white hair, moustache, and glasses. Grandpa Earl then continued, "Well, son, to be old and wise, you first have to be young and stupid. So, I'd say you're off to a good start."¹

We all have a lot to learn. The good news for us is that God's laws are available to us through our own personal Bible reading and prayer, as we listen for God's guidance. God's direction is also accessible through congregational worship, Christian education, and our conversations of Christian fellowship. Whether we're trying to learn the Ten Commandments or the entirety of God's will for our lives, celebrating our tenth with guidance will be possible because God's law is learnable.

2—RELEVANT & HELPFUL

A second clear point of Psalm 119 is that celebrating our tenth with guidance is possible because God's laws are relevant and helpful. There aren't many things in human culture that have stood the test of time as well as the Ten Commandments. God's most famous rules for us are beneficial and poignant in every generation. Listen to how God's instruction motivates and protects the one who sings verses 101-104: "I hold back my feet from every evil, in order to keep your word. I don't turn away from your ordinances, for you have taught me . . . Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way."

These verses make me think of a teenager who, when faced with a moral challenge, remembers what her mom and dad said. Even under great temptation, the youth's desire not to disappoint her parents helps her make the right choice.

Another comic strip that I saw this week was *Zits*. That's the strip with teenager Jeremy who never seems to grow up. In the first frame, Jeremy walks by his dad in the living room and says, "I'm [going] out." Sitting in a chair, reading a book, his dad responds, "Remember your curfew." Jeremy replies, "I will." "And obey it," adds his father. "I hate the fine print," thinks Jeremy as he goes through the door.² If we didn't know Jeremy, we might wonder if he would come home on time that night. But those of us who have read *Zits* for years know that Jeremy is closely bonded to his parents who love him a lot. And even if obedience seems like fine print to him, Jeremy knows it's part of an essential and life-sustaining contract between him and his parents.

This kind of relational guidance is not antiquated and outdated. It's still helpful and relevant in the 21st century, and it's still important in the 10th year of our church. That's why it's necessary for us to keep our church's ministries strong so we can reinforce the good teaching that parents are doing in their homes, with the positive instruction of our Youth Director Michelle Perry, our Children's Ministry Director Brenda Boren, and the volunteers who assist with our Christian education program. All of us in our congregation working together have a lot of influence and power to shape not only our young ones, but even us older ones. We have the ability to make the wisdom of God powerfully present today. For all of us who have to make decisions and choices, God's guidance is still relevant and helpful.

3—STRONG FUTURE

A third good point for us here in Psalm 119 is that celebrating our tenth with guidance is possible because God's instruction will give us a strong future. Not only does it teach us wisdom from the past. Not only does it keep us from wrong doing in the present. God's guidance directs us as we step into the future of next week, next year, and the next decade.

Verse 105 proclaims, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” When we’re walking in the dark, we hesitate because we don’t know what’s in front of us. We don’t want to make a misstep and fall. But when we have God’s light shining out ahead of us, then we can have confidence about what we need to avoid or that we’re headed in the right direction. In verses 111-112, the Psalmist sings, “Your decrees are my heritage *forever*; they are the joy of my heart. I incline my heart to perform your statutes *forever, to the end*.” This is a promise that we who sing these words will always try to follow God’s rules, and it’s an affirmation of faith that God’s guidance allows us to anticipate a joyful future.

I hope the benefits for such a life are obvious to each one of us as individuals. I also hope that we can see how this light of God shining into our future can be beneficial to us as a congregation. We won’t get to the official tenth anniversary of our first worship service in this building until April 2018. But, as we celebrate our tenth annual Veterans Tribute Run and our tenth Operation Christmas Child this month—and soon will be experiencing our tenth Christmas, our tenth Ash Wednesday, our tenth Lent, and our tenth Easter—we can already experience God guiding us in the direction of our future. As we finish up our first decade of ministry in this place, we can begin to see God’s light shining ahead into our second decade, helping us avoid the pitfalls and giving us confidence to step forward into the strong future where God wants to guide us.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I direct your attention to verse 108. There the Psalmist sings, “Accept my *offerings* of praise, O Lord.” As you heard from Scott Warren this morning, we’re beginning our stewardship drive for 2018. Because of our pledges of tithes and offerings, God’s guidance is available to us through this congregation. I hope you will want to promote this guidance by joining us in celebrating our tenth.

¹Brian Crane, Oct. 10, 2017.

²Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman, Oct. 10, 2017.