

# Story and Meditation: Yes, I Remember

October 4, 2020

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 20:1-20

by *Eric Anderson*

It doesn't happen often among the kolea. They're generally pretty mellow birds. They don't seem to mind things very much – even rain in Hilo or, to tell the truth, rain on the Alaskan coast. They don't chase other birds away for the best worm or spider. They don't make a lot of noise. I've never actually heard a kolea make any noise. Have you?

But it does happen. Just like among humans, among the kolea, every once in a while you'll find a bully.

There was one bully who was just mean. He flew about the parks and yards looking, not for likely places to eat, but likely places to bully another kolea. He'd land in Lili'uokalani Gardens near a perfectly pleasant kolea and run at it, bat at it with his wings, and peck at it with his beak. The poor bird would hop away to another spot, but the bully would pursue. If his victim flew away, he might fly after it, or he might choose another nearby.

All around the kolea community of Hilo, no kolea felt safe.

One day, however, the bully ran into a bigger bird than he. A hunting 'io caught him unawares. He only spotted it as it glided toward him. He ducked and rolled and got into the shelter of a bush, and the 'io couldn't reach him. It screeched its disappointment and disappeared.

But it had not been entirely unsuccessful. The bully's right wing was broken. Until it healed, he could not fly. If he left the bush, he'd be easy prey for that 'io, or for a cat. If he didn't leave the bush, he'd probably starve. There wasn't enough food to eat beneath it. Things looked bleak.

It took a while for kolea version of the coconut wireless to spread the news: the bully's wing is broken and he's hiding in a bush. Kolea flew by, curious, to look. The bully glared defiantly out at them. He might not be stronger than an 'io, but if he died, he would die the strongest of the kolea.

Three other birds stood together nearby and watched. "What do we do?" asked one. "What can we do?" asked the second. "We could feed him," said the third.

They looked at him, astonished. "Do you think he'd thank us for it?" asked the first. "He'll come back just the same or worse," declared the second. "Quite likely," said the third.

Then the third bird shrugged her wings. "It's not a question of what kind of bird he is," she said. "It's a question of what kind of bird I am."

The three of them plucked worms from the grass and carried them to the bully in his bush. He pulled back his beak to strike, then hesitated, seeing the worms. "Buying my favor?" he growled. "It won't work."

"No," said the third bird. "We're not. We don't know whether you'll be grateful or not. We don't know whether you'll behave better or not. But we are who we are, and we won't let you starve."

"It won't work," repeated the bully. "I'll be back stronger than ever."

"You might," said the third bird. "But I promise you this: You will never pick on a lone kolea again. If you pick on one, another will come, and another, and another, until there are too many for you to resist."

"We will not let you starve. We also will not let you abuse."

In Mel Brooks' 1981 movie *History of the World, Part I*, there is a scene where Brooks, playing Moses, brings three stone tablets down the mountain. He announces to the unseen people that God has given them fifteen commandments, but as he does, one of the tablets slips from his fingers and shatters on the ground. Rallying, he cries, "Ten! Ten Commandments for all to obey!"

This week I wrote a lament based on that movie scene, because if we can't keep ten commandments, I can't imagine that fifteen would go any better.

As Kathryn Matthews writes at [ucc.org](http://ucc.org), "Our culture, with those engraved stones we value more highly than the mysterious, less tangible treasures of our faith, also offers us many other 'gods,' and many ways to 'worship' them, to organize our lives in a kind of subjugation to them, putting them above all others, whether we would like to admit it or not. We just don't recognize them as gods."

This week a very important person was asked a very important question and failed to provide a very acceptable answer. The question was, "Are you willing, tonight, to condemn white supremacists and militia groups?" The answer was a call to stand back and... stand by. Even as the candidate's spokespeople sought to explain, the white supremacists themselves have said they understood it to be a summons to prepare.

Today I denounce white supremacy. I will use most of the Ten Commandments to do it.

Reggie Williams writes in *The Christian Century*, "White supremacy is the manufacture and maintenance of systems and structures for Whites only. Hatred and harm are always secondary

effects of this primary thing: a longing for an idealized community populated by a fetishized, White ideal.” A fetishized, White ideal is in direct violation of the commandment against other gods. Whiteness, indeed, becomes an idol to worship. Think about that endless succession of paintings of Jesus, Jesus who came from the Middle East, but in these paintings Jesus has a skin tone that wouldn’t last ninety minutes without turning bright red in that climate. Europeans, hearing that they had been made in God’s image, turned around and made Jesus – and God – into *their* image. That’s not only backwards, it’s idolatrous.

White supremacist theology, in a grotesque perversion of Christianity, insisted on creating Biblical justification for the ideas and the structures they created. Simply put, they insisted white supremacy was God’s will – and what a misuse of God’s name that was.

White supremacy encouraged theft and murder, then justified them. It justified the horrors of sexual assault and abuse. It justified lying. It gave cover to coveting.

If I were God, watching the ideas of white supremacy sweep through nations, watching those ideas take form as governing structures and statues, watching those ideas wreak their harm upon generation after generation, I don’t know whether I’d weep, or rage, or decide that it was time to find another Noah and begin again.

White supremacy in America is not entirely unique in the world. Other cultures have their own racist structures. They are also evil. This is the one in which we live, and this is the one we *have* to change. Whatever others may do, white supremacy shatters the commandments of God. They might as well lie in fragments on the ground.

Amy Erickson writes at Working Preacher, “The commandments, however, are not simply a list of rules given to whip into shape a stiff-necked people; instead, they are better viewed as a means to form and nurture an alternative community, bound not by common goals of wealth and prestige, but rather by loyalty to a god who has chosen to redeem a group of slaves from a life of bondage. The commandments mean to sketch out a space where human beings can live fruitful, productive, and meaningful lives before God and with one another.”

We could have such a community, not one founded in domination, greed, and power. We could have such a community if we acknowledge that racist ideology is a sin. We could have such a community if we repudiated white supremacy and, as quickly as we may, followed the commandments of God.

Amen.