

The Ten Commandments, and God's covenant with us

Sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, March 4, 2018

The Third Sunday in Lent (year B), Exodus 20:1-17 (John 2:13-22)

Exodus 20:1-17 (NIV): *And God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

In this season of Lent, we take time to consider our sins and do the work of repentance and forgiveness, seeking reconciliation with God and with each other in Christ. In Lent, we've been using the Rite I form of worship, a more traditional set of prayers, one that presents the summary of the Law at the beginning of the service. In Lent, we've been alternating between starting the service with the Ten Commandments, or the Summary of the Law: Jesus' summation of all the law and the prophets. These are good places to start in considering our part of the covenant God makes with us.

This morning, we heard in our Old Testament reading one of the two Biblical sources for the Ten Commandments (the other is Deuteronomy 5:6-21). First, there are commandments about our relationship with God, then there are commandments about our relationship with each other. Love God, and love your neighbor.

We are told to have no other Gods before the LORD our God, not to make or worship idols, not to misuse the name of the LORD. The last of this first group of commandments concerning our relationship with God is part of a hinge to the second group. We are commanded to keep the Sabbath day holy. The other part of the hinge is honoring our fathers and mothers. Then we hear very brief commandments: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness, don't covet. Several of these last commandments are a mere two very short words in the Hebrew. But the commandment with the most explanation is this hinge commandment, this commandment that connects our love of God with love of neighbor. A short paragraph is spent in reinforcing the importance of keeping the Sabbath day holy.

Keeping the Sabbath day holy is how we start to live out our commitment to God in the world. If we love God and have no other gods or idols, then we will keep the Sabbath day. We resist the idolatry of work, and instead put our trust in God more than trusting in the work of our own hands. Rather than simply taking time to ourselves on a day off, we take time to worship God—

reminding ourselves that God is God and we are his, and reminding ourselves of the grace of God's love in our life and the importance of our relationships with each other in Christ.

Part of the hinge between the two sections in the Ten Commandments is honoring father and mother. This is the start of how we take the love of God and apply it to the love of our neighbor. The Ten Commandments move into our inner lives as well—not just concerned with our actions but also with the desires that we have for other things, and the way our motivations can move us to commit other sins or toward virtue.

I wonder whether we have too casual a relationship with the Ten Commandments. I think we treat them as obvious or say that we all believe them. But I think we disregard the Ten Commandments a lot more than we care to admit. Keeping the Ten Commandments is hard. Certainly for me, I think it is very hard.

Part of the challenge of keeping the Ten Commandments is that we look around at others and wonder “is anyone else really taking these things seriously?” Even for clergy, Sunday is a work day, so how can we keep the Sabbath? Elisa and I take Fridays off, but I must confess that email and sermon preparation and distractions from God often make this “Friday Sabbath” more ordinary than sacred. Even in the midst of worship, it takes effort and commitment to focus on God and to be fully present with God as we pray.

We live in a world that values other gods—gods of money and pleasure, and the great god of the self more than anything. It seems easy to let secular values be the judge of what we think of the Ten Commandments, taking what we like and avoiding the commandments that aren't convenient to us. We say that the Ten Commandments are the basis for our laws, but only two of the commandments carry the force of law: laws against murder and theft. Adultery gets some attention in civil courts, but dissolving the covenant of marriage is easier and easier in state laws. Certainly coveting what someone else has is the basis for most advertizing. Are the Ten Commandments really that appealing?

I once met someone at a party who commented about the Ten Commandments. Whenever someone at a party learns that I am a priest, there is often a slightly defensive effort to self-justify by the other person. In this case, the other person said “I don't go to church very often, but I do keep the Ten Commandments!” I don't think she saw the irony... I guess she was a bit like me—we both have a lot to learn about what it means to keep God's commandments.

Keeping the Ten Commandments is hard, especially if we are trying to keep the spirit of the commandments as well as the letter of the commandments. Jesus said that contempt for others is like murder. The spirit of the law is very hard to keep indeed. Keeping the Ten Commandments is hard because doing so asks us to surrender to God. I don't mean surrender like an army giving up to the conquest of an enemy. I mean surrender like a child trusting a father and mother. Surrender like a friend leaning on someone who is trustworthy when weak or in need. Surrender like when we stop trusting in our own opinions and desires, and start trusting in God's desires for us.

The Ten Commandments have their place in the Christian life, but they are not the center of the Gospel. The Good News is the beginning and end of the covenant that God makes with us. A covenant is sort of like a contract, only a covenant involves all of who we are. The way God makes a covenant with us is that first he takes action to save us and claim us as his own. Then he helps us to follow him and stay in relationship with him.

God didn't ask the children of Israel to obey him, starting with the Ten Commandments, and if they got it right *then* he might save them from Egypt. No, he first saved them from slavery, then he gave them the commandments to understand how to stay in relationship with him. Despite our disobedience, our lack of surrender and lack of love, God still loves us. God is still committed to us in his covenant with us.

The first part of the Ten Commandments starts with God's commitment to us: I am the Lord your God! "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." God's covenant starts with God's commitment to us, to love us and claim us as his people. We are not perfect in keeping this covenant, but God is perfect in his faithfulness to us. Again and again, God's people turned away from him. But again and again, God called them back to him, and sent prophets to bring his voice to the people. In the fullness of time, God came himself, becoming a man in Jesus Christ to live and die for us and to rise again that we might have new life. God sent his Holy Spirit to strengthen and renew us, and help us stay faithful to him.

The road of Lent is not all about coming to grips with our sins. Though our work of confession and repentance is important, it is part of a process of growing closer to God. This is a process of reconciliation with God and reconciliation with each other in Christ. This journey of Lent is, as we call it in this year's Sunday Evening Lent program, the Road to Rejoicing! Lent is preparation for Easter and the celebration of the forgiveness of Jesus. We rejoice that God gives us his Holy Spirit to help us follow and keep the commandments and better love God and love our neighbor.

This Lent, consider the Ten Commandments. Consider the commandments as an opportunity to learn how to grow closer to the God who loves you, to know more how to love each other, and how to find the fullness of life that God wants for us. God claims us as his own. By keeping the Ten Commandments, let us respond to God's grace in our lives and grow closer to him.