

## SERMON

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR B

“GOSPEL IN A CUP”

EXODUS 20:1-17 / MARCH 4, 2018

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

A man well known for his ruthlessness in his business dealings with others once announced to writer Mark Twain, “Before I die, I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments out loud at the top.”

“I have a better idea,” replied Twain. “You could stay in Boston and keep them.”

Mark Twain’s comment ‘to keep them’ is humorous, at one level; but sobering on another. Is ‘keeping them’ something we aspire to do anymore? I mean, how many of us can even remember all ten of the commandments?!

What comes to mind when you hear the words, “The Ten Commandments” or “the Decalogue” in the original language – literally ‘ten words’ – ‘deca’ meaning ‘ten’ and logue from ‘logos’ meaning “word”.

The Decalogue; the Ten Commandments?

For some folks mention of the Ten Commandments brings immediately to mind the epic 1956 movie with Yul Brynner as Pharoah and Charlton Heston as Moses lifting high the tablets of stone upon which God had inscribed them. Others think of the Decalogue if they think of it at all, as hopelessly out of date and antiquated.

These commandments, they say, many of them at least are simply not all that applicable anymore, certainly not taken as seriously anymore. “You shall not make for yourself an idol...” In some versions, “You shall not make for yourself a graven image.” So what? Why not?

“Thou shalt not bear false witness.” This is a legal concern and not a bad idea. But does it belong in the “Big Ten”?

“Honour your father and your mother.” Really. We all know that there are some parents that have treated their children so shamefully, that honouring them would just simply be wrong.

“You shall not commit adultery.” Well, given that nearly half the marriages in North America end up in divorce, and the constant reports of the illicit sexual liaisons of the rich and famous, let alone the not so rich and famous, this commandment seems really out of date and not in synch with modern times.

And keeping The Sabbath; well, how many in our society do that any more?

Well as you can probably tell, I am being somewhat facetious here. My hope is that as we think together about the Ten Commandments this morning we may knock some of the dust off these ancient rules and find there is more value to them than we thought. And perhaps it may be that we might be encouraged to think again about those actions, those behaviours we truly ought not to do, if we are to live in a healthy way in our relationships -- our relationships with others and our relationship with God.

As we examine these commandments we might be encouraged to consider other 'you shall not's'. For instance, I would trade many of the commandments handed down to us for one that said, "You shall not poison the environment or you shall not exploit the earth." Another one I would like to see is, "You shall not oppress those who look or think differently from you." And in light of President Putin's and Trump's recent comments, "You shall never use nuclear weapons," seems an appropriate new commandment.

So to recap – some say the Ten Commandments are hopelessly outdated, and of much less relevance today. Still others find these commandments off-putting because they are just that – commandments. We don't like to be commanded; we don't like to be told 'you shall not...' After all, we often don't like being told what we should do, let alone what we can't do.

And it's true, at first glance they do seem like a list of regulations, a list of do nots, negative in tone and content. In fact, I would conjecture that most of the objections to the validity of these specific commandments relate to the view that they are nothing more than rules or laws for behaviour. But in

reality they are much more than simple moralisms which arguably are meant for a specific group of people in a particular place and time.

Part of the problem in viewing the commandments this way is that we forget the original context in which they came into existence. The Hebrew people had been enslaved in Egypt for over 400 years and increasingly oppressed and abused. They cried out to God for deliverance. And finally, God heard their cry for help and they were delivered through the leadership of Moses from slavery in Egypt, Moses having led them to freedom across the Red Sea.

So, in Jewish tradition, the Decalogue is a response to God's grace. The Jews traditionally order the commandments differently from Christians. What the Jews regard as the first commandment or word, many Christians just dismiss as a prologue or introduction to the commandments. But in Jewish tradition, the first commandment is not "You shall have no other Gods before me," but is instead, "I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." In other words, the first commandment is to, "Remember what God has done for you!"

All the other commandments flow from this, even the commandments about relations with other human beings because they flow out of response to God's goodness. Those who had been slaves in Egypt have been liberated and thus are called to a new allegiance, to the one who has provided for them so graciously, and these commandments define what life with God will look like.

Life with God is defined by a dual relationship, a relationship with God and with other people. Jesus noted this when he refused to separate the commandments to “love God with all that you are” and to “love your neighbour as yourself.” That principle is traced back to the Decalogue, these foundational rules or laws of behaviour from the liberating and life-providing God of Israel.

I like the formula of Karl Barth, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, he said that “the law is the *form* of the gospel, and the gospel of grace is the *content* of the law. The form – the ‘letter’ – of the law, by itself, is a hard, condemning message. But the content requires a form, a structure to mediate that content into our daily experience. The law, as in a commandment, is like a cup; the gospel is the coffee. If you have a cup without the coffee, the empty cup just reminds you of your thirst and what you are missing; but if you just have the coffee and no cup, it is, practically speaking, impossible to get the coffee into your lived experience.

The Ten Commandments are the terms and conditions and guidelines of a covenant relationship. “I will be your God; you shall be my people” – and here is how we will treat each other. The Ten Commandments are not simply a list of ‘do not’s’. Rather, they are a framework through which life, specifically life with God, is lived. Some of the rules change in terms of their importance or relevance; some do not; others are general enough to allow for interpretation and application that suit the changing nature of our world and our relationships. And they can spur us to consider new rules to govern life on earth that promotes healthy relationship and wholeness of life. And in our sincere attempts to live in a way that considers the ethics that

correspond to our covenant relationship with God we do so in loving response to what God has so lovingly done for us.

There is an internal logic to the commandments that is both compelling and beautiful: these commandments we are told were first written on tablets of stone and given to Moses for the Hebrew people. The way we attend to God (tablet one) shapes the way we attend to our neighbour (tablet two). In other words, faithful worship of God leads to proper love of neighbour. Proper praise of God shapes our social responsibility; good theology is good ethics.

For example, having “no other Gods before me” means that money, sex, and power will not wiggle their way onto the altars of our lives, and thus will not be used to exploit others. Keeping the Sabbath is a reminder that all of creation is a gift and we have a responsibility to be wise stewards of it. “Honouring father and mother” reminds us that we are not self-made, that we stand on the shoulders of others. “Not bearing false witness” suggests we should build up community by speaking truthfully of our neighbours. “You shall not murder” suggests that others are gifts who bear the image of God just as we do. And not making wrongful use of God’s name invites an attitude of praise and thanksgiving toward God, rather than anger or cynicism or an attitude of irreverence.

When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus unites the two tablets, summarizing the whole of the law and gospel: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.

When we speak of repenting of our sin during lent and becoming right with God, we are not simply saying that eight of the big ten have been checked off, and now, if we can just get that bit about the Sabbath and coveting down, all will be fine. Rather, when we fail to rest from our labour, or covet a friend's job, or tell a little lie (let alone some of the more dramatic offenses like stealing, and adultery and murder), the whole fabric of our relationship with God and one another begins to fray and in time will be torn apart.

The Ten Commandments are not meant to 'catch us' in our sins; not meant to impose regulations to restrict our freedom by locking us into rigid rules. It is not a list addressed to a people whose fundamental identity is as sinners. On the contrary, the Ten Commandments are like a love letter addressed to each one of us and all of us together in the complex configurations of our lives, in a longing, hopeful description of how life looks like when its vertical and horizontal dimensions are in proper alignment. They are more 'descriptive' than 'prescriptive.' They provided a framework for living with one another and with God in a way that was mutually respectful, caring, loving – minimizing the harm we might do to one another if we simply all went our own way and lived by our own rules or by no rules.

The first tablet deals with relationships with God – the vertical; the second tablet with relationships with other human beings – the horizontal.

Vertical and horizontal together constitute the form of the cross: God reaching to us so that we can reach out to God. God stretching out arms wide as infinity and eternity so that we can reach out to each other. It is a

list that points the way to true freedom, a law given by a gracious God to people being saved out of slavery, words of love chiseled into the stone of our hardness of heart to help us live in ways that promote harmony and peace and justice; in ways that bring wholeness of life to us as we live with one another in community. Thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

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