

“The Commandments”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 7, 2018

World Communion Sunday

Psalms 19:7-14

Rev. John Wahl

Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17

You may remember the news story from last summer about the installation – after a long legal battle – of a 6000-pound stone monument in Little Rock, Arkansas upon which the Ten Commandments had been engraved. It was located right outside of the state capital building and had been there for less than twenty-four hours when someone who, as it was later revealed, suffers from schizophrenia, drove his car into the 8-foot tall piece of granite, shouting “Freedom!” smashing it to pieces.¹

And while this story – and others about displaying the Ten Commandments in public spaces – has elements of controversy and intrigue; it only serves to highlight how little today’s society focuses on the actual content and meaning of what the Hebrew people call the Decalogue – which literally means, “ten words” – written on tablets of stone to be protected and cherished for many generations to come. As you probably remember, the Israelites will construct a special container – the Ark of the Covenant – to hold these tablets during their Exodus journey and entry into the Promised Land. Until the Temple is finally constructed, under King Solomon’s reign, the Ark will reside in the hallowed Tent of Meeting,

When we left the Hebrew people last week, they had just completed the safe crossing of the Red Sea; as Moses lifted his staff to direct the waters to collect as walls on the right and the left. Through this dry path, the former slaves walked away from the pursuing Egyptian army and into freedom. The only laws they had ever known during their generations of captivity were the oppressive rules of their captors. Now, they began their desert wanderings with no identity or organizing principles – other than that they had had been saved by God.

In the Jewish tradition, to this day, the first commandment is the Decalogue is not, *You should not have other gods before me*. In their system, that is the second word; instead the first word is, *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery* (and then they combine what we number 9 and 10 – bearing false witness and coveting – into one). It is from these first words about God rescuing them that the rest of commandments flow. The rules that follow are not so much about God keeping tabs on us, as it is our response to what God has

¹ From *The Guardian*, June 29, 2017

done for us. If God has shown mercy to you, then you are not to make idols of other gods. If God has led you out of bondage, then you are to respect your parents. If God has set you free, then you are not to steal or to covet what your neighbor has.²

This opening word of God accomplishes several things. It keeps the commandments personally oriented as God says, *I am the Lord your (singular) God*. These are words given to *you* by *your* God. The law is a gift of a God who has heard *your* cry and redeemed *you*. The Ten Commandments begin with what God has done on *your* behalf.

But while the address of the commandments is to the individual, their focus is not private welfare; but, instead, how to serve the life and health of the community. It is on this point that I would like to dig in a little more deeply this morning; because for whatever reason, or number of reasons, we seem to think that we have outgrown the commandments, that they are nothing more than a list of *dos and don'ts*, a morality code that we don't really want to listen to.

But God does not give us the law in order to perfect us, or even make us better people. Frankly, the commandments are not really about us – they're about our neighbors. God gives the law not so that you can be more spiritual, or live your best life now, but so that your neighbor can have their best life now. Just take note how many times God makes this point: do not bear false witness against your neighbor. Do not covet your neighbor's house, or your neighbor's spouse. And on the Sabbath, the day of rest, make sure that all of your neighbors – from your sons and daughters to your sheep and oxen – get to rest just like you do.

John Calvin, the father of our Reformed tradition, taught that the most important function of the law was not to show us all the places where we've gone wrong, but to teach us how to faithfully respond to God's grace. God's law shows us how to glorify God and lovingly witness to our neighbors to the merciful God whom we serve.

And so, the law challenges us to mirror in our relationships God's undeserved and unlimited affection for us. God is faithful no matter how unlovely or unlikable we are or may become. Therefore, God's call not to murder challenges us to protect our neighbors from harm as much as we can; calling us even to do good to our enemies. This, after all, is exactly how God behaves toward all those God creates. And so, when we work to protect the dignity and sanctity of life, people catch a little glimpse of what God is like.³

² Dennis Sanders, "Narrative Lectionary Reflection."

³ Doug Pratt from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

The Ten Commandments were originally given to the people whom God had freed – they are designed for free people. They are not meant to limit our freedom by telling us what things we are not free to do. That is an overly simplistic Christian view of how the Old Testament law functions. Instead, these commandments are what lives that are freed in Christ actually look like. In order to love God's law, we must remember that through Christ's death and resurrection we have been set free. Maybe, you believe God has set you free from an addiction, or from loneliness, or from a crippling fear, or from some toxic relationship. And now that we are free, the law shows us what a free life looks like.

Freedom is not when the powerful take whatever they want, but when we respect the property of others and we do our best to help them maintain it and retain it. Freedom is not when the strong dominate the weak, but when the bodies and lives of all – from the impoverished, to the handicapped, to the vulnerable, to the elderly – are protected and their rights are respected. Freedom is not the endless satisfaction of every impulse, but the commitment of two people to each other.⁴

To read the Ten Commandments as simply a list of rules to be memorized and obeyed without question – or to be engraved on granite and erected on the public square – misses the point. These words were given to show the Hebrew people how to respond to the gift of freedom that God had given them. Now that they were no longer in bondage to their Egyptian oppressors, they needed help knowing how to act. What does God's freedom, lived out in a community, look like? How could they be sure that they wouldn't fall again in to the patterns of slavery that they were so used to?

If you read what comes between the Exodus and the gospels (which we will be doing in the coming weeks and months), one of the major themes is that God's people fail to understand what God is about. They want rules and rulers while God wants to love and be loved. Just twelve more chapters into Exodus, the people will be forging a golden calf to worship in place of the God who brought them to freedom. Throughout the Old Testament, God sends prophet after prophet to tell the people that they're focused on the wrong things, and they need to turn their ways around.

So, finally, God sends Jesus; to see if being literally face to face with God's beloved people will finally get this point across. Maybe by coming to live among us, God will finally be able to convince us that it's about relationships, and not rules. Again, we know what happens. Those who are enamored with rules and rulers cannot understand how Jesus could heal on the Sabbath or sit down at the table with sinners.

⁴ Rolf Jacobson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Jesus, in referencing Deuteronomy 6:5, uses a positive formulation of the command to avoid other gods and idols saying, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” By designating this as the greatest commandment, he does not nullify the other nine; but, instead, opens them up to limitless possibilities. Loving God with all we are helps us to realize that the law is not given for us, but for our neighbors. They are, as Patrick Miller describes it, the fence-posts that mark out a good neighborhood.⁵

We are called to love God, to love the freedom God has given us, and to love the law that helps us to live into that freedom. Freely we have received, freely we are to give. As we come to the table this morning, let us remember that God’s law, God’s free gift, is given not for us, but for the sake of our neighbors; that we should never forsake or forget our love for them. AMEN.

⁵ As referenced by Amy Merrill Willis in “Between Moralism and Moral Vision”