

## **Season after Pentecost - The Ten Commandments (Week 4)**

June 16/17, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Matthew 22:34-40; Exodus 20: 12,14

*Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The Ten Commandments do not start with an order or a threatening “or else.” The Ten Commandments begin with “a breathtaking announcement of freedom.”<sup>1</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” “The Decalogue begins with the good news of what the liberating God has done and then describes the shape of the [life of] freedom that results. [As I’ve said before] The good news of the God who sets people free is the music; the commandments are the dance steps of those who hear it playing. The commandments are not weights, but wings that enable our hearts to catch the wind of God’s Spirit and to soar.<sup>2</sup> We begin gifted with the eternal love of God and move to live in that freedom, modeling our lives after the Lord of life and love. This is our story — heard in the lives of the Israelites and seen in the life of Jesus — it’s the story and truth that shapes our lives.

[Robert] Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a volunteer firefighter and ambulance attendant who, as a child, had to have some of his teeth extracted under general anesthesia. Jack was terrified, but a nurse standing nearby said to him, “Don’t worry, I’ll be here right beside you no matter what happens.” When he woke up from the surgery, she had kept her word and was still standing beside him. That experience always stayed with him. It became a part of who he was.

Nearly 20 years later his ambulance crew was called to the scene of an accident. The driver was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and Jack crawled inside to try to get him out of the wreckage. Gasoline was dripping onto both Jack and the driver, and there was a serious danger of fire because power tools were being used to free the driver. The whole time, the driver was crying out about how scared of dying he was, and Jack kept saying to him, what the nurse had said to him so many years before, “Look, don’t worry, I’m right here with you, I’m not going anywhere.” Later, after the truck driver had been safely rescued, he was incredulous. “You were an idiot,” he said to Jack. “You know that thing could have exploded and we’d have both been burned up!” Jack shrugged, “I just couldn’t leave you.”

That’s the way the commandments work. First comes the experience of being cared for, the experience of being set free — from slavery in Egypt or sin and death through Jesus. It becomes a part of who we are. *Then* there follows the life shaped ethically around that profound experience. It’s like the nurse being right here beside him that takes root in a man who later risks his life for a stranger because he knows in his bones that’s what you do when someone is vulnerable and scared. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you . . . out of the house of slavery”.... Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.... I am with you to the end of time.” These are the formative experiences and stories that *prompt us to live lives shaped by the freedom created by that God.... a freedom to live*

differently than those who are slaves to fear, pride, addiction, money, self... a freedom to live lives reflecting the Lord who created and frees us.

For the last two weeks, we have looked at the first three commandments that focus on our relationship with God. Now we turn to the final commandments that lays out the lifestyle and way of life God's people are to live. These seven commands speak to our relationship with each other, with our families and our communities — relationships that are intended to reflect the love, compassion, generosity and provision God shows us. This week, we begin with these two:

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

“You shall not commit adultery.”

I've grouped these two together because they both have to do with one of the most vulnerable areas of most of our lives — the family — the one we were born into and the ones we create.

“Honor your father and mother” assumes the parents act honorably. What does honorably mean? We are created in the image of God and freed to act as God would. We do our best to love as God loves. God is loving but not blindly indulgent. God has both expectations and forgiveness. God is powerful but never misuses it to vent, punish or destroy the beloved. The Lord loves and teaches God's children how to love one's self and your neighbor as our self.

Martin Luther expanded this commandment to all those who have authority that we must respect. Again, it is authority exerting its power for good, acting with

care and compassion, justice and mercy as God does. In the later history of the nation of Israel, you find in scripture that God judges rulers by how well they cared for the widows and orphans, the most vulnerable in society, and not just for themselves, their cronies or those who could reciprocate. And among those vulnerable, were the elderly, the parents now too old to provide for themselves. As their children and as a community, God says to honor them with care and respect. That is the background for this commandment. The family and the community, when its leaders and members follow God's example, are to be places where heaven touches earth, where family is both an incubator and a haven, where each person has the love, support and care needed to be all God created him or her to be. Thus, when we are the children or citizens in such life-giving, godly microcosm, — even though they are not perfect --- we are to honor those parents or those in authority who teach, care, direct, protect and guide us, because they are showing us God's ways of love, concern, healing and shaping the world..

A similar expectation is laid over marriage. Those who choose to marry and build a life together are to reflect God's way of loving and relating to us. God's love is always other-directed, acting for the sake and the benefit of the beloved. It's a love that notices and responds to the legitimate and urgent and honest needs of the other. God's love is lavish, faithful and reliable. It's a love that says, "I'm in it for the long haul." "We humans need that kind of unconditional assurance if we're to feel safe enough to be and to risk to become all God intends

us to be. We need that steadfast commitment so we can have the freedom and confidence to truly be ourselves and become our better selves. When each person can count on the other in that way, they won't need to hide or waste their precious lives protecting or promoting themselves. When they both love as God loves, each is freed to fearlessly share their wonders and worries, deepest feelings and wildest ideas, doubts and dreams, knowing the other can be trusted to treat you with the utmost respect, care and tenderness. When **both** love this way, **both** will thrive together. I will tell a couple who is marrying, that the kind of love that will last and grow for a lifetime is not just a feeling or idea, it's a way of life, a 24/7, everyday and forever decision. To God, this kind of love comes natural. For us humans, we have to intentionally, daily choose it and even then, we only get close with the help of God who is perfectly and forever faithful and trustworthy.

Now we get to the "yes, buts." Though no parent, spouse or civil authority will ever be perfect on this side of eternity, abuse, manipulative, injustice, destructive of life and spirit are not to be tolerated or accepted. These are not God's ways. We must take such abuse seriously. We must stand up for God's desire that all people to be safe and free. Yet even then, we still strive not to act with the hate, violence, bitterness for that would be wrongly modeling destructive, ungodly power not God's. Hard? You bet. But God's ways, modeled in the commandments and in Jesus, are the right, best and life-giving ways. When parents, civic authorities or spouses are doing their human best to model the love

and ways of God — flaws and all — we aren't to disregard God's commands.

When we are rightly to be sensitive to those who have not known loving parents and spouses, we still can't dismiss God's Word. As Barbara Brown Taylor advises, "Those who ignore the divine teachings do so at their own peril – not because God is standing over them with a hammer, but because the teachings describe a way of life. To ignore them is to wander into the way of death instead..."<sup>3</sup>

There are many varieties of families and understandings of marriage. The commandments still hold. They are to be places where its members do their best to follow the example of our Lord. "The commandments are not weights, but wings that enable our hearts to catch the wind of God's Spirit and to soar."<sup>4</sup> That's the truth we learn from the history of the Israelites and the life of Jesus. It is poured over us at baptism. It is grafted into our very souls in the Word, the Meal and God's community. As Luther wisely advised, "With practice one can take the Ten Commandments on one day, a psalm or chapter of Holy Scripture the next day, and use them as flint and steel to kindle a flame in the heart." Let our hearts be on fire for God, so that we follow in God's commandments and ways of love in our families, communities and relationship. With active compassion, we are called to pursue a life and world where all can know the sense of acceptance and belonging there is in God's family.

Linda M Alessandri 6/16/18

## ENDNOTES

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1. Thomas G. Long, "Dancing the Decalogue" Christian Century March 7, 2006  
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2006-03/dancing-decalogue>

2. Ibid

3. Barbara Brown Taylor, Feasting on the Word, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, Year B, Volume 2, pg. 77

4. Thomas G. Long, "Dancing the Decalogue" Christian Century March 7, 2006  
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2006-03/dancing-decalogue>