

Season after Pentecost - The Ten Commandments (Week 2)

June 2/3 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Matthew 22:34-40; Exodus 20: 1-11

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

There was a sea captain who, every morning on his ship, spent 30 minutes alone in his quarters, with standing orders that he was not to be disturbed.

The crew grew curious. They wanted to know why this was so important to the captain. Finally, they spied through the captain's porthole, and what they saw was this: the captain would open a safe in the wall, take out a piece of paper, and stare at it for 30 minutes. Then he would put the paper back in the safe, lock it up, and the day would begin.

A day came when the captain did not emerge from his quarters at all. They found him in his quarters — he had died in the night. Torn between respect for their captain and their curiosity, curiosity won out. They managed to break into the safe and find the paper the captain had studied so regularly and intently each day. What had been so important? This is what it said on the paper: "The left side is the port side; the right side is the starboard side."¹

It's a silly but instructive story. There are some things in our lives and in our jobs that are so important, we have to keep reviewing them so we don't forget. You don't want the ship captain to delay an order to avoid a disaster because he needs to consult a cheap sheet on which way is the starboard. You don't want an emergency tech stopping to consult his manual on how to calculate a drug dosage when you are

in the midst of cardiac arrest. There are things that need to keep being reviewed so they're not forgotten. I'd put the ten commandments in that category.

It's not just a case of being able to recite them, as helpful as that can be. We need to think about them. Consider their meaning. Wonder how they apply to current circumstances. And most importantly, the commands are a way to look at our own lives as followers of Jesus.... we consider them regularly to be sure we are actively letting them steer our lives in the ways God intended.

I read this week, that the commandments are a guide to how **"to act as one was created to act."**² When we live the commandments we are most closely being the persons God created us to be. **We were created to live a harmonious relationship with God, one another and all of creation... to live in love.** That was, that **is** God's plan.

Love the Lord your God

with all your heart, and

with all your soul,

and with all your mind.' and

love your neighbor as yourself

When we are doing these things, then we are **living into our created-ness**

The commandment start with the very basics. The first thing you do to be your best, God-created self is to give your loyalty to the one true, faithful, perfectly loving God:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven

above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

When the Israelites received the gift of the commandments at Sinai, they had just fled a country with its own gods. In Egypt, the Pharaoh himself was considered a god. They were heading toward a new land where their neighbors had their own gods, too. Archeologists have found these small clay statuette idols often kept in homes — showing their loyalty to the god it represented *in hopes that god* would show favor to their family or farm.

You see the problem with god-idols is not just their physical manifestation — a statue, here or there. A god-idol is a pledge: **“YOU are the One in whom I am putting my trust.”** This god-idol is whom I place my ultimate loyalty.

Later, when the Israelites are about to enter the promised land, their leader Joshua will be very clear. There is only ONE TRUE GOD. The God who delivered us from slavery, guided and provided for us in the desert wilderness. Decide now whom you will follow, in whom you will put your trust and commit your life. Choose — Today, NOW. “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” How about you?

As profound a question and response as that is, CHOOSING the God or gods you will follow is NOT just a onetime choice. In fact, that's the temptation and problem. We think we can say, "love you, Lord"... or "Yeah, I've been baptized".... "I've been saved"... "I'm a child of God" "I go to church".... "I give money".... AND convince ourselves **that is it ---- that is all the loyalty and attention we need to extend to God.** Whether we're the Israelites or 21st century Christians, we need to put our trust in God alone, stay loyal to the LORD as our sole god not just once or on Sunday but *each and every day*, in each and every choice.

You know as well as I do, that there were and will always be other idols to seduce, attract, dazzle, and lure our attention. We may think we are a bit more sophisticated ---- no statues of saints or other gods in our houses. Yet idols litter our lives and lives of those around us. In what do we put our trust? What do we declare to be ultimately important? (*solicit answers from congregation - ex. Money, possessions, power, drugs/alcohol, relationships, technology, etc.*)

The theme for this year's DE-MD Synod Assembly was, "Reformation 500 — Now What?" We the church and we its members have our own dangerous idols that get in the way of loving God with all we have and being all we were created to be. There are churches and members who pour all their loyalty and attention to the Idol of the glory days... buildings... congregations... being right... our doctrine....

Here is where we churches can stumble into that second commandment of misusing God's name — doing and saying things in the name of God that would NOT be on Jesus' agenda... (Crusades, Spanish Inquisition, missionaries of convert or die method) I saw a bumper sticker that said — **I believe in a separation of church and HATE.** Church and its people have judged, condemned, demeaned, ignored folks IN GOD'S NAME, when it isn't God's will at all. It is a misuse of God's name.

We can stumble over the second commandment also in the God we NAME to the world? What image of God do we portray or describe? One that suits our politics – liberal, moderate or conservative? One that will put us in the right and THEM in the wrong? Or, do we proclaim what is true to God's WORD... A God who loves all people, and us fiercely and eternally but who will NOT be tame, domesticated or convenient?

In our review of the commandments this summer, we begin at the beginning. It begins with the love of God ----- no idols, no misuse of God's name or personhood - And that is **not** to placate or make offerings so *that* we have God's favor. Listening, learning, practicing the commandments is about having God's eternal love **therefore** I love God and my neighbor.

Because we are so... well, human and **God loves us**, God gave the commandments we are considering these weeks of summer. **Not** to flex God's power.... or suck all the fun out of life... but to present a **great vision of life**³ — a

life for which we were created, a life in which we are FREE to say yes to God, to grow to love as God loves, as Jesus loved.

This week, during your devotion or prayer time or when you are driving, consider what idols may have crept into your closets, minds, opinions, actions. Let God free you of idols that only serve to enslave you. Instead, "the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' and love your neighbor as yourself" Then you are living into God's gift of your beloved created-ness.

Linda M Alessandri 6/2/18

ENDNOTES

1. David Haley, "Back to the Basics: Love of God and Love of Neighbor" October 26, 2008 as posted by skokiecentralchurch

2. Terence E. Fretheim, "Commentary on Exodus 20: 1-17" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org

3. Pope Benedict XVI as quoted by Michael R. Heinlein in OSV Newsweekly as posted on www.osv.com