

Trinity Sunday - The Ten Commandments (Week 1)

May 27, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Matthew 22:34-40; Exodus 19: 1-6, 20:1-2

I don't remember how old I was. I don't remember the details of my deceit. What I do remember is my usually gentle, soft spoken and loving mother turning toward me and saying with a steely tone, "I HATE liars!" I remember being shocked and ashamed. I remember feeling deeply sorry I had lied. But I remember having an even deeper regret that I had disappointed my mother, who loved me deeply, completely and unselfishly.

"Thus you shall say . . . You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (19:3,4), I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (20:2)"

Or, as Pastor Fred Craddock puts it:

"I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. I want you to remember that . . . you were nobody, you weren't citizens, you had no name, you had no address, you were strangers and aliens in a foreign land. You were slaves; you worked and broke your back to fill the pockets of other people. You were living, but only partly living and I gave you freedom. I want you to remember that."¹

Remember, why? So they, so we will feel beholding to God instead of Pharaoh?

No. Remember because this is the truth – God's boundless love and relationship with us came **before** commandments and guidelines for our behavior.

From Eden to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Moses and the Israelites to us — the Lord loves and wants the very best for all creation. God loves the creation God made with the selfless passion and devotion, which I first caught a small glimmer of in my mother. The Decalogue — what we call the 10 commandments — is a gift given out of unquestionable, unending, unfathomable, unselfish love for us. Our

response is not to the commandments alone but to the love of God, to God who first and foremost loves us. That's what I experienced that day in my childhood standing in the kitchen with my mother. It wasn't merely that I broke a rule but I disappointed and disrespected the person who cared, comforted, encourage, supported me because she loved me. I was forever changed by that realization. It is the same connection the Lord wants the Israelites and us to get. It's not just about laws but loving and trusting God who first loved us, who leads us from so many varieties of slavery to freedom.

To some it may seem an oxymoron to talk about law and freedom. We have this misguided notion that freedom means being able to do whatever you want, whenever you want, with whomever you wish. That's not freedom. That's becoming a slave to yourself — your whims, desires, ego — and expecting the rest of the world to honor your freedom over their own. Multiply that times each person in the world and you have a recipe for chaos, mayhem and violence. That is our self-centered human notion of freedom. It's often expressed another way. Everything is relative. There is no real right or wrong. It all depends on how you look at it. That's just another kind of slavery --- a slavery to wind and whims that are inconsistent and uncertain. To many the Ten Commandments are merely finger-wagging, burdensome, outdated religious controls. It's time we set the record straight. It's time we get it straight in ourselves.

When the Israelites escaped generations of slavery, they became a people in a wilderness without a social order or laws to guide them. How do thousands of freed people live together so that ALL may be safe and prosper? Can you imagine the potential for chaos and panic? They were only in the desert for three months when God brought them to Sinai to receive the gift of the law ---- a way to order life

so that all may be free and have enough. The Commandments were not simply a list of “Do’s and Don’ts” — it was a plan for a people to live together peacefully and beneficially. And they still are. When you put up a fence around your property to keep your children, pet or livestock safe, we don’t call that imprisonment. It’s an act of love so they may play and live freely and safely. The commandments serve a similar function – providing the parameters for living together safely and respectfully as a community.

As we begin this seven-week look at the Ten Commandments, we must first get this straight. God’s love came first, God’s rescue came first before and “only then does God make a claim on our behavior . . . God does not give the law as a means to salvation.”² God claims us as sons and daughters forever and first, and then gives the law for our well-being and the good of all creation. That leads to a second point.

“God does not give you and me the law in order to perfect us . . . [or] so that we can get more spiritual or have our best life now, but so that your neighbor can have his or her best life now . . . And that is good news. Good news for my neighbor. God loves them so much that God tells me not to kill, steal, commit adultery, and so on. And good news for me. God loves me so much that God tells my neighbor not to kill, steal, and so on.”³

Finally, this last point. “These commandments are what lives freed by God, freed by Christ look like.”⁴ What we term as commandments could also be thought of as “descriptions of the life that prevails in the zone of God’s liberation. ‘Because the LORD is your God,’ the Decalogue affirms, ‘you are freed not to need any other gods. You are free to rest on the seventh day; free from the tyranny of lifeless idols; free from murder, stealing and covetousness as ways to establish yourself [or

worth] in the land,”⁵ in life. The Ten Commandments are not kill joy limitations to keep us from having fun. They are a gift from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – in love so that WE and our NEIGHBOR can have life-giving joy and peace together as we live to love God and love one another.

Pastor Thomas Long wrote, “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.” Let’s use the next six Sundays to remember the dance steps of the commandments. And whether you consider yourself a good dancer or born with two left feet, when you listen with great eagerness for the music of God’s grace and love, everyone can step into the dance of the commandments and Trinity.

Linda Alessandri 5/26/18

ENDNOTES

1. Fred Craddock, “Back to Basics” The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) p. 12

2. Rolf Jacobson, “Commentary on Exodus 19: 1-6, 20: 1-17: Week 1 - Nineteen comes before Twenty” as posted on www.workingpreacher.org

3. Ibid

4. Ibid

5. Thomas G Long, “Living by the Word: Dancing the Decalogue” excerpt from an article in Christian Century March 7, 2006 as posted on <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-143064402/living-by-the-word-dancing-the-decalogue>