

Season after Pentecost - The Ten Commandments (Week 5)

June 23/24, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Matthew 22:34-40; Exodus 20: 13, 15, 16

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

We are in the middle of our look at the “Big Ten” — the Commandments or Words originally give to us as a gift at Mt. Sinai. How would you answer the following multiple choice question: In my experience, I have heard more public discussion about: 1) the display of the Commandments in public places; 2) following the 10 commandments 3) whether something violates the 10 commandments 4) the ingredients in a Big Mac? I would bet more of us could say, “two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun” than recite the 10 commandments in any order.

I do not say this to shame us. Maybe, to startle us a bit. Public figures and groups try to claim the Bible and Christianity as their personal rule of thumb and the historical guidepost for our nation. It has come to feel more like a strategy or ploy than a truth. I have rarely heard any of the commandments come up in debates about any hot topic issue from taxes to gun control, from the state of the economy to immigration. I know, I know. There is an important line between the state and religion. But can you have it both ways ---- use the Bible and Christianity to win votes and not apply the ethics of them to one’s private and public lives? It’s just one of the messy avenues on which we can find ourselves when we try to earnestly address God’s commandments. And to earnestly know, address and follow these “strategies for staying God’s freed people.”¹ is a part of being God’s sons and daughters.

As we have been stressing, “the Ten Commandments begin with the identification of the God who liberated Israel from Egypt:

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt...

“The word ‘Egypt’ refers to Pharaoh and Pharaoh is the abusive, brutalizing king of Egypt who practiced and exploited a concentration of power and wealth. [Pharaoh is not just a

long ago historical figure in the ancient land of Egypt.] You will notice that we do not know Pharaoh's name and that is because Pharaoh keeps turning up in our history time after time. So, Pharaoh is the right name for every brutalizing concentration of wealth and power that acts in violence against vulnerable people. The Exodus is the powerful acknowledgment of that [recurring,] brutalizing domain of human history from which we have been emancipated.”

“At the outset, the Ten Commandments named this emancipating God:

I am the Lord your God.

I am the Lord of the Exodus.

I am the God who emancipated you.

I am the Lord of new promises.

It is an announcement that the world is under new governance. That new governance is detailed in the Ten Commandments. They are rules for freedom and justice that contrast with the bondage and injustice of Pharaoh. The covenant at Sinai is a warning that if you do not keep these commandments, you will be back in the grip of Pharaoh [and slavery, in one form or another,] and his insatiable demands.

Back to having to produce on demand,

Back in the rat-race of production and consumption,

Back in fear and anxiety and alienation,

Back in hostility toward the neighbor.”

“Thus, the Ten Commandments are strategies for staying emancipated once you get away from Pharaoh. This new strategy, first of all, says you have to honor God - that's the first three commandments - to the exclusion of every idol, every "ism" such as racism, or sexism, or nationalism, or the worship of stuff that is rare or precious or attractive or beautiful or empowering.”

“The new strategy means in the Ten Commandments to take the neighbor with utmost seriousness. So, the last six commandments are all about the neighbor and treating neighbors with legitimacy and dignity and viability and especially disadvantaged neighbors - not to violate the neighbor for the sake of greed.

And between these two commandments of honoring God and taking the neighbor seriously ...is Sabbath day. Keep Sabbath: take a break from the rat-race of busyness and exhaustion and do not let Pharaoh define your life.”

“If we think about these three strategies in the Ten Commandments, each of them contrasts with the way of Pharaoh. Pharaoh believes that there are many loyalties all of which enslave. Pharaoh believes that there are no real neighbors and Pharaoh never stops for Sabbath. It's 24-7. Moses at Mt. Sinai declares that there are new possibilities for life beyond the pressures of anxiety and fearfulness and greed.”² The commandments announce a lifestyle and way of community, which keeps us free from the ways of Pharaohs that drain us of life and keep us from being one another's neighbors. To know this way of freedom is to take the commandments seriously, to revisit them often and to lay them over our behaviors, thoughts and attitudes to see how they compare.

In my confirmation classes, we spend a good deal of time going through Martin Luther's explanations of the commandments in the Small Catechism. Today we consider what most would consider pretty straightforward directives: You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Doing our mental checklist before confession or communion, we might easily say — Nope, didn't kill anyone this week. Nope, didn't take anything that wasn't mine this week. Nope, didn't lie about my neighbor or coworker this week. When you look at Luther's explanation, our conscience says, “Not so fast!” We want to keep the meaning narrow and manageable. But as a strategy for staying God's freed people, there is a complexity of to these commandments that is far wider and deeper than the simple words first communicate.

Didn't kill anyone? Maybe not a knife in someone's heart, but how about wounding someone's spirit or dignity with mean or sarcastic words? Over the years, teens have told me horrible stories of damaging assault and abuse. The gay teen who was told that he might as well kill himself now. The girl, whose father committed suicide, who had others say, “Look at you. No wonder your Dad killed himself.” Can you even imagine? It may not

only be what we say but what we fail to do or say, “instead [to] help and support our neighbor in all of life’s needs.” And we haven’t even mention topics such as war, abortion, capital punishment or euthanasia?

Did I steal? Well, maybe no shoplifting, burglary or robbery of property. But what about someone’s reputation or well-being? Lying on income tax forms? Taking office supplies from an office? Not returning overpayment from a cashier? Does helping our neighbor improve and protect their property and income include caring about wages and the cost of health insurance for the working poor? What does this commandment have to say about the ever-widening gap between those who have and those who have not? Do you see how these commandments stretch like a web into our public and private worlds?

Did I bear false witness? Oh, this one is a challenge. Consider the great human past time and industry of gossip — passing on information about another person as if it’s a commodity we have a right to spread for personal gain or prestige. What of the betrayal of confidences; being dishonest or hypocritical; jumping to conclusions about what someone said or did and passing it on as fact? How do we apply this to Facebook, twitter, e-mails and the next cyber offering? If, as Martin Luther reminds us, we are to defend, speak well of and interpret others in the best light, what does that say about our lack of civility in public discourse and the attacking of a person rather than their opinions, which allows little room for open, honest or productive discussion? There are depths and dimensions of God’s commands that touch all part of life.

There is a bumper sticker I occasionally see that say, “The Bible said it. I believe it. That settles its.” I hope it will not shock you to hear I humbly have to disagree. I believe the Bible is the living Word of God but there is more to it than the literal words on a page. Look at all the questions we can face in trying to understand these three, seemingly straightforward commandments. We are to take God’s word and commandments seriously ---- seriously enough to let them effect our daily and public lives. We are to take God’s word and commandments seriously — seriously, enough for faith communities to continue

to question and discuss how they apply them in circumstances that didn't exist when they were first given. We continually need to seek God's pathway on roads that didn't exist when God gave the commands at Mt. Sinai.

It's not enough to hang the Big Ten on the walls or commit them to memory. They are to take up residence in our hearts so we don't go running back to slavery in Egypt or the oppressive ways of the Pharaoh. They are to become a part of who we are so we live them intentionally, joyfully and freely. I hope you'll take time to read and pray over Luther's explanation of the commandments that are printed in your bulletin. Understanding and applying God's commandments is among our callings as God's freed people ---- NOT so that we become judges of *others*, but so **we** can be living, breathing, walking witnesses of the difference it makes when we follow God's commandments as the beloved, freed people of God. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 6/23/18

ENDNOTES

1. Adapted from Walter Brueggemann, "Strategies for Staying Emancipated" March 04, 2018
http://day1.org/8145-walter_brueggemann_strategies_for_staying_emancipated

2. Walter Brueggemann, "Strategies for Staying Emancipated" March 04, 2018
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