

## Our Guide For Living Exodus 20: 1-17; John 2: 13-22

I would guess that most of us grew up learning and reciting the Ten Commandments that are the focus of our Exodus scripture this morning. I remember in the Christian Reformed Church we grew up in, regularly the message on Sunday morning included the Heidelberg Catechism and specifically the Ten Commandments individually. My vague memory is that the messages seemed like forty-five to sixty minute sermons on one Commandment- rather in depth. I doubt that memory is totally accurate, but when we stop to think of the value of what God gave to the Israelite people so long ago, I wonder if we continue to pay as much attention to them as we should. We say we live by the Ten Commandments, but do we really take them as seriously as we could? Do we view them as imperatives or commands that we are forced to do OR is it possible we would feel differently about them if we saw them as a guide for living a joy filled life with God- both individually as well as the world in which we live? It seems quite appropriate, during this season of Lent, that we take time to consider these as guides for living.

The Ten Commandments, unlike much of scripture, are direct, straight forward and succinct. They do not argue or reason. They simply state. You love God above all. You don't kill...You don't steal, etc. Luther once said that when God speaks to humanity, God talks, "baby talk." When the people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, this mass of people needed basic guidance in a clear voice much like parents talk to a young child. The Ten Commandments seem like one more evidence that the awe-inspiring God we serve just knew- even today- that this guidance was necessary for humanity as long as it is on earth. The chaotic and confused state of many lives are a sad testimonial that humanity still needs direct and straight forward guidance.

I found it helpful to read through the chapters of Exodus both before and following our chapter 20 scripture this morning. This was a period of time when this multitude of Israelites were wandering in the wilderness having just been freed from slavery in Egypt. In these chapters, we find Moses trying to figure out how to handle this huge company of people and it quickly became clear that organization

was necessary. In chapters 20-31, God calls Moses to Mt. Sinai and gave him the Ten Commandments as well as laws about the worship altar, slaves, violence, property, restitution, social and religious laws, justice issues, Sabbath and festival rules and many more. As you remember, the people of Israel eventually lost sight of God while Moses was on the mountain for so many days and they built a visual sign- a golden calf- which they worshipped. When Moses returned and found the golden calf, he angrily threw down the tablets on which God had written all the laws, breaking them. God is also angry with the people, but Moses intercedes with God on behalf of the people, and then God calls Moses once again to come up the mountain where Moses received a second set of tablets.

The order of The Ten Commandments is critical- first they state our relationship with God and then our relationship with our neighbor. The way we relate to God- our worship of God- how we express our gratitude to God- guides the way in which we will relate with our neighbor.

I would like to focus for a bit on the Ten Commandments- these guides given to the people of Israel that- even though our times are different- can and should continue to guide our lives even today.

Commandments one through four- focus on God

1. "You shall have no other gods before me." -reminding us that the first devotion in our lives should be to God, while struggling against the world's priority for power, material success, status, and appearance.
  2. "You shall not make for yourself a graven image...you shall not bow down to them or serve them." We may not carve idols that we worship, but what about priority for success or the latest gadget being a form of worship?
  3. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." The words we use when speaking God's name must show honor to God.
  4. "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." God created the world in six days, set aside the seventh day, consecrated it as special for rest and worship.
- Step back for just a moment and be reminded that the first four commandments

focus on living in relationship with God- God is our only God, nothing can be more important in our lives than God, use of God's name in an honorable and honest way and considering the Sabbath Day as holy and special.

Commandments five through ten- focus on our relationship with others

5. "Honor your father and your mother." Respecting and valuing those who have years of life experience, whether we are related or not.

6. "You shall not kill" -not simply taking another's life but... those who abuse their own lives and impact all others around them; two-thirds of this world's children are malnourished or starving- many of them in supposedly in the richest country in the world; killing the soul of another- especially a child- teaching them through words and actions that they are of lesser value than others. We could go on and on.

7. "You shall not commit adultery." Our society is filled with inappropriate sexual thought, abuse and often action- what is our role in this if we turn a blind eye?

8. "You shall not steal." Theft of personal identity and property is on the rise. Is falsely taking away another person's good name a form of stealing?

9. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Gossip, telling falsehoods and bullying are all ways that we can and do damage to the name of others.

10. "You shall not covet anything that is your neighbor's." -discontentment with what we have in life; speaking harshly about others we envy.

Be reminded that commandments six through ten focus on our relationship with others- honoring fathers and mothers, valuing human life, valuing the marriage vows, valuing the possessions of others and not taking them as our own, not gossiping and stretching half-truths about another and being content with our own life.

Jesus said it best In Matthew 22: 37-40, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

During this Lenten Season, how do our lives stack up against God’s words in these Ten Commandments? Have we obeyed them, first of all, out of gratitude to God? We are forced to obey them to some degree because they are the basics of the laws that still govern our society, but are we conscious of the fact that by valuing God and the honor of others, we are honoring the God who created them?

It has often been said that if everyone truly took these Ten Commandments to heart and attempted to make them their way of life, we likely wouldn’t need the multitude of shelves full of books interpreting our laws nor the multi-billions spent enforcing those laws.

The incident in our New Testament scripture from John is often called, “Jesus Cleansing the Temple.” It is one of those accounts of Jesus that throws us off balance for a bit because we are not used to Jesus becoming angry and even violent. So, we ask why Jesus was so angry. After all, people traveled long distances to observe the Passover and it makes sense to be able to purchase animals and doves required for sacrifice in Jerusalem. Also, the temple tax each person was expected to pay had to be in certain coinage which required- for some- the exchanging of Roman coins into the shekels or half-shekels. The Roman coins had pagan portraits on them and thus were not allowed to be used in the temple. It was likely, however, human beings such as they are- those with animals available for purchase and those with coins to exchange did not do that without great financial benefit to their own pockets. It must have been clear that the temple, designed and dedicated to God’s worship, was being used as a convenient place of commerce with little thought of God’s glorification- only their own.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke place this event during the week of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion and give it simply as a protest against the desecration of the Temple- a concept that certainly fits with the focus of the first four of the Ten Commandments. However, John places this account at the beginning of Jesus’

ministry and gives it additional meaning. The purpose of the gospel of John is to give concrete evidence that Jesus was the Christ, the promised one. It appears that John is providing this event as a sign of what will happen later in the gospel- Jesus turning some of the lives upside down, which of course, eventually led to his trial and death. When Jesus was asked by what authority did he have the right to clear out the Temple, his words were: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again.” This, of course, made no sense- a building that was in process of being constructed for forty-six years could not be rebuilt in three days! With the advantage of time, we know Jesus wasn’t talking about the temple of Herod, but his own body, destroyed by them, and raised after three days.

The Ten Commandments give a clear, though sometimes difficult to attain, guide for our lives. We are reminded through them as well as the incident of Jesus cleansing the temple, that we can never permit buildings, symbols, traditions, customs or liturgies in church life or worship to become substitutes for our real devotion to God and our treatment of others. If our church building, programs and how “we have always done it” become more important than our true worship of God and caring for others, have we not made an idol of them?

So, in this period of Lent, it is an appropriate time to reflect back on the guide for living this morning- the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ reminder to the Jews. We have the opportunity to rededicate ourselves to be certain our worship and our relationships with others are truly guided by God and the joyful freedom that is ours because of God’s great love. May we always be conscious of God’s presence in this space as we come together. It must be said that God is truly being glorified and that we truly hear God’s voice in the midst of it. With Christ’s brief compilation of the Ten Commandments ringing in our ears- “Love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves” as well as Christ’s example of a life of service, may this time of Lent be life changing individually and collectively. With hearts filled with God’s grace, love and forgiveness, may we be renewed to be God’s hands, face and feet in a world so desperately in need of them. Amen.

Karen Houtman 3-7-2021