

The Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-17

A Sermon by Adam Bartholomew

I made a stunning discovery this week as I began preparing my sermon for today. We begin our liturgy each Sunday during Lent with the Penitential Order, which focuses on the 10 Commandments and confession. I read the commandments, and you, kneeling, respond. I was stunned when I paid attention to the responses in Rite I in contrast to Rite II:

Rite I: Lord, have mercy upon us,
and incline our hearts to keep this law.

Rite II: Amen. Lord have mercy.

What happened that led the authors of Rite II to omit “incline our hearts to keep this law”?!

Exodus 32 describes the tablets on which the commandments were written as two in number and written on by God. That corresponds with the fact that the first commandments establish boundaries within which we are to develop our relationship with God, while the latter commandments concern our relationship with other human beings.

This division corresponds to Jesus’ summary of the law, which is a sequence of two quotations from the Old Testament. The first, from Deuteronomy 6, speaks of loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength. The second is from Leviticus 18 and commands us to love our neighbor as our self.

The passage from Dt is known as the Shema, meaning “Hear!” from the introduction to the command to love God with all your heart. It goes, “Hear (*shma*), O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God. . . .” Dt commands Israel to “recite them to your children, to talk about them when you are at home and away, when you lie down and rise up, to bind them as a sign upon your hand, as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorpost of your house and on your gates.” Jews embody this command, dramatize it by putting a mezuzah on the doorpost, phylacteries on the forehead and the hand. In Rev 12 the 3rd person of the Unholy Trinity of beasts institutes a blasphemous parody of this command, demanding worship as God and requiring everyone to be marked on the right hand and the forehead.

David Noel Freedman proposes that the command to honor father and mother is the fulcrum of the Ten Commandments, since it is in attending to the parents’ teaching of the commands to their children through their continual talk about them wherever – at home or away – and whenever – when you lie down and when you get up – that the children will come to love and keep the law.

Psalms 19 is one of the psalms that celebrates the perfection, sweetness, and life-giving power of the law. Psalm 119 does so again, in 176 verses, like a lover who just cannot stop talking about

the beloved, even though the one who is not in love got sick of hearing about it by about verse 16.

In a few weeks we will hear the words of the prophet Jeremiah looking forward to the day when God will make a new covenant with the people and the law of God's covenant will be written on the people's hearts.

And St. Paul speaks of Christian freedom from the law in a way that sounds as though the prophecy of Jeremiah has been fulfilled through the gift of the Spirit to the Church. We do not need the written law anymore because it has come to be written on our hearts. St. Augustine picks up on this when he says, "Love God, and do what you want."

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How do we nurture a love of the Ten Commandments? Some Christians are promoting them using advertising methods. They put signs on their lawns as they do when they want us to vote for so and so for congress or Just Say No on a bond issue. They may even pay to put a billboard on a highway, or engrave them on 3 ton stone blocks and carry them around on a flat bed truck, as one judge started doing when he lost the battle to post them on the wall of his court room. I passed one church with a huge billboard with the words,

Whatever child is brought into the house of the Lord
will never be brought into a court of law.

True as that may be, I must say, there is little in this campaign that woos my heart. The message that comes across to me is there is so much dirt in our world – street crime, sexual promiscuity, family disintegration – that we need a spiritual detergent to get it clean. The Seven Deadly Virtues seem to be directed at other chaps. If we are going to advertise the Ten Commandments, the genre should not be a soap commercial but the song of lovers caught up in the heat of passion who live them day and night, who find them sweeter than honey and the honeycomb, and whose song sets up a song in my heart so that I begin to sing along.

Lent is a season a season for falling in love with the commandments, or rather falling love with the God who gives them. These are the Ten Words, as Exodus calls them, not of a judge but of a lover, whispering in our ear the things that will make our life together rich and happy. Or perhaps better, it is a season for recapturing our first love after a dry spell in our marriage to God. It is a time to go on a marriage retreat and talk about how we have been doing with each other. Such a retreat may turn out to be a very painful time, the first time in a while that we have dared to look at the ways in which we

have erred and strayed from God's ways
and followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts,
leaving undone those things we ought to have done,
and having done those things we ought not to have done,

as one of the confessions in Rite I puts it. These just echo the words of St. Paul in today's reading, in which he declares,

I don't understand my own action.

For I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate.

There are the words of a lover who has been unfaithful and who is suddenly overcome by what he has done.

“O wretched man that I am!” he cries out.

Who will deliver me from this body of death?!”

Fortunately for Paul, he knows that the lover he has so wounded still stands by him begging him to return to a life of fidelity and joy.

David Noel Friedman, in his very creative book on the commandments, which he entitles *The Nine Commandments* – “*Nine*”! – not *Ten*! – observes that the final, tenth commandment, is different from all the others. It concerns not particular actions or words as the others do but an attitude or state of mind (one could say “of heart”). Coveting is not a punishable crime, he points out. Rather it is the driving force behind the crimes named in what we call the second table of the commands, namely the commands against killing, adultery, stealing, and bearing false witness. No one can know that you are coveting anything that is your neighbors until you steal it, even kill for it, or take another’s spouse in adultery. That is why, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, Jesus goes for the heart as place of violation:

You have heard it says of old, “You shall not commit adultery.”

But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

These Ten Words whispered in our ear by our Divine Lover on this Lenten Marriage Retreat may lead us into pain beyond a focus on the family. If we truly want a richer relationship with this God who woos us, we need to have the courage and fortitude and trust in the commitment of our Divine Lover to look at other aspects of our life that we have been afraid to look at before, or that may shock us when our Lover names them. I am thinking here of behavior that is the warp and woof of our economic life and has been so through modern history. How much of what we have as a nation is the fruit of coveting what belonged to our neighbor, a coveting that has led to stealing and murder in order to get it for ourselves? The history of how White people of European origin have coveted and stolen the labor of Blacks and the lands of Native Americans, the history of the labor movement in this country, the environment costs of our prosperity that steal from our descendents – we hardly know what to do with these violations of our Divine Lover’s words other than to confess and lament our manifold sins which we for more than from time to time have committed. But lament would be a start, a radical turning from denial. Who knows where our Divine Lover might lead us had we the courage to enter the valley of the shadow of death trusting the presence of our Shepherd?

The purpose of the Ten Commandments is to free us from those actions and words that poison and destroy our life together in this world and from the desires that lead to those destructive actions and words. God introduces the Ten Commandments by reminding us: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of bondage.” This is the purpose of the commands: to free us from destructive bondage. Our goal is to be free. Thus we pray not only, “Lord, have mercy upon us,” but go on to say, “Incline our hearts to keep this law.”