

"The Ten Protections"

Sermon on the Ten Commandments at St. Peter's Cathedral: Helena, Montana

March 4, 2018

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning!

As we continue our journey through Lent, we also continue to hear from the Old Testament, some of the great passages about **Covenant**. God's covenant **is** God's promise to his people that he will always be faithful and that he will never forsake us, regardless of how we might disobey or forsake him.

Two weeks ago, we heard about God establishing his covenant with Noah, after the flood. God promised never to punish the earth that way again. Last week we heard about God's covenant with Abraham to keep His promise of giving Abraham and Sarah an heir together. Abraham and Sarah received their son Isaac and the promise continued.

Today we hear the Ten Commandments which were given to Moses on Mount Sinai. This revelation marked a further understanding of the covenant, with ten very clear limits on the behavior of each disciple of the Lord. I was helped by a mentor who once referred to the Ten Commandments as 'The Ten Protections' because they called people to obey the One God who brought us of Egypt and provided a code to protect both the greatest intimacy among people while enabling human life to flourish in community.

But before I go any further, I thought a bit of levity might be in order. Perhaps you have heard the story of Moses coming down from the mountain while the people were waiting for him. One of the members of the community ran up to Moses and asked what God had said to him. Moses replied, "God said to take these two tablets and call me in the morning!

Well, that wasn't too bad. Let me try another version! Moses came down from Mount Sinai, the people were anxiously waiting for him and asked Moses what God had said. Moses said to them, "I have some good news and some bad news! The good news is that I got God down to just 10 Commandments! The bad news is that adultery is still in!

Let's move on to the content in the Ten Commandments.

We can begin by dividing the commandments into two parts. The first four are about one's relationship toward God. The last six are about our relationship toward our neighbor.

These laws are something like the constitutional law of ancient Israel. They represent the broad principles of community life. They are absolute and applicable in any situation. Together these laws constitute the basic requirements of the covenant being established between Yahweh and Israel. The violation of any one of them would represent a breach of the covenant relationship, thus threatening the integrity of the community that is based on the covenant.

I want to look at each of the commandments and briefly summarize them.

The first commandment is: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other Gods but me.

God is One, not many. There are other gods and there would have been many other gods in Egypt. But the difference is that the God of Israel is a God of revelation. The other gods come from human speculation. The God of Israel is the God to whom we submit and to whom we conform our life. The gods of human speculation are gods people invent in order to try to get from them what they want: rain, or sun or wine or long life. It is this one God and no others who brought Israel out of slavery from the land of Egypt. This God gave the covenant.

The second Commandment is to not make an idol, either in the form of an image or any kind of substitute in the imagination of the Israelite. Imagining a substitute can end up creating another God. We are to put nothing in the place of God. A very important spiritual principle is at stake here. It is that we 'become what we behold'. We become like the God we worship. We are formed by the God we worship. In psalm 115, for example, we hear the words:

"the heathen idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but they cannot speak, eyes have they but they cannot see, ears but they cannot hear, noses but they cannot smell...**Those who make them are like them**, and so are all who put their trust in them".

The third commandment is that we shall not make wrongful use of the Lord's name. We are to show God respect in thought, word and deed. God is holy and we have been called to be holy. God's word and God's name are never to be taken lightly.

The fourth commandment, and the last commandment intended to keep us in a right relationship with God is to "Keep holy the sabbath day". Personally, I think this commandment is one of the most violated of the Ten! God gave this commandment for worship, for our rest and for our pleasure! God gave us this commandment as a gift. The sabbath, Jesus taught, was for man, not man for the sabbath. We are to rest as God rested on the seventh day after the work of creation. The sabbath is to be set aside as holy, as 'given to God' and as different from the other six days. The Christians moved the sabbath from Saturday to Sunday in celebration of the Resurrection, but the principle is the same. It is a time God has set aside for worship, for a celebrative meal and for rest.

The last six commandments are about our duty toward our neighbor. They begin with the admonition, "Honor your Father and Mother". It does not say, obey your father and your mother, but honor them. Jesus often talked about giving to God a higher loyalty than your parents and biological family. Sometimes God calls us to a way of life that is different from what our parents or family legacy expect of us. At the same time the commandment calls us to a tender care toward our parents' generation in a way that also builds community life across the generations.

The commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" insures that human life is sacred. None of us has the authority to take another life. In his "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus radicalized killing to include anger and insulting others. The opposite of killing is reconciliation, forgiving others and asking forgiveness of those we have hurt.

The seventh commandment, "you shall not commit adultery", is to protect marriage from violation to its intimacy, its vulnerability and its trust. It guards marriage and family from the intrusions of a third party and protects the transfer of a family legacy.

"You shall not steal nor bear false witness against another" is aimed as much at lying as it is against perjury in court. The very survival of community is threatened when the weak, disadvantaged and falsely accused are not protected. I like the modern translation of this commandment that we have in our catechism: 'to speak the truth and not mislead others by our silence.' (BCP p. 848)

Finally, the commandment "not to covet" is a protection against jealousy of another's privileges and property. It seeks to warn all of us of the danger of greed, or inordinate desire and of wanting what someone else has, only because they have it and we do not.

A sermon on the Ten Commandments can make for a long sermon and it is time to bring this sermon to a close. I want to finish simply by connecting to last week's sermon on Abraham's trust in God as it relates to obedience to the Ten Commandments. Christians hold to the teaching from St. Paul which says that one of the reasons why God gave us the Law, or The Ten Commandments was to teach us that we could not keep the law all the time. None of us obeys the Law all the time. Because none of us can keep the Law all the time, Jesus was sent to show us through his ultimate sacrifice on the cross, that God loves us in spite of our disobedience. That is the essence of Jesus' good news. That is why we believe that we are saved by God's unmerited love, not by our own merits.

However, that does not mean that we are never to try to obey the laws and the limitations of the Law. Much of the time we do. But none of us obeys all the time. That is why we are saved by faith and not by keeping the Law. The only one who fulfilled the whole law was Jesus, who said that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

The Good News is that God is faithful to us even when and especially when we are not faithful to God. No one obeys God all the time. No one keeps the law all the time. We are all disobedient. That is the bad news. But the good news is that God has consigned all of us to disobedience in order that he might have mercy on us all. This is how Paul concluded the argument that the gospel includes all, both Jew and Gentile. In Romans 11:32, Paul writes, "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience, in order that he may be merciful to all."

That is the essence of the Gospel, the good news and the action of Jesus crucified on the cross. For that we can only give thanks and praise. Amen

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