

Words for Our Journey

Third Sunday in Lent
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, Ph.D.

March 15, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19;
1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Would you all take out your bulletin and I will ask you to do something? In the first lesson I want you to count how many commandments there are in that lesson. Hint – things like, Thou shall not, is a good clue and it is a commandment. But there are other starts there also. It is an interesting question. Are there ten? Or are there eleven? Maybe there are twelve. You can debate it with the person next to you. How many people found ten? What about eleven? What about twelve? So how many commandments are there?

It is really interesting, you see, how churches and denominations have counted them. In fact it is kind of fascinating. A lot of protestant denominations keep the commandments about making idols and worshiping them together as one commandment, that way when they get down to the end they have ten. Lutherans do something different. We have our own form of theological mathematics. Can you believe that? We group together all the commandments about idols, and make them one, so about making idols and worshiping idols we join that all together as one. About having no other gods (small g) before God (capital G), we put all that together in one, and when we get to the bottom about the coveting commandments, we split them in half. We have one about coveting people and one about coveting other people's stuff. There we are! Ten! I bet you never knew that before.

What is equally fascinating, of course, is all the public display and debates we have about the Ten Commandments. A year or so ago, wasn't it, when one of our local communities, got into an enormous fuss about a sculpture with the Ten Commandments on it in their little town park. I think the outcome was that concerned people bought the piece of land that the sculpture was on so it didn't belong to the town anymore. Therefore the Commandments could stay where they were. From time to time a dispute arises as to whether they are fit to be displayed in court rooms, or in public buildings, or in public places. My only comment is this: If only people were as concerned about keeping the Ten Commandments as they are about where they should be displayed.

A well-known preacher by the name of Richard Fairchild, recounts an experience he had as a teenager. I wouldn't mind betting that this is an experience that many of the teenagers and children here, have also had. When he was 15 years old, he envied his friend Bob, because Bob was allowed to do anything Bob pleased. Most especially, Bob could stay out late – as late as he wanted to. Many were the time in the middle of roaming around the town with Bob all evening, Richard would have to leave him and head back home to meet his curfew with his father. There it was, only 10:00 p.m. on the weekend, and 9:00 p.m. on weekdays, because you have to go to school tomorrow. Then he would have to report to his father, either at 9:00 or 10:00, while Bob, good old Bob, could continue playing games and talking to girls, or whatever it was.

Richard resented having to go home. He resented the rules that his father and mother put on him. He wanted to be like Bob. He wanted to do whatever he wanted to do. One night as his curfew time approached, he told Bob how much he envied him. How he wished his father was not so strict. To this day, Richard remembers what Bob said to him. "Richard, you are lucky. My parents don't care what I do. My parents have given up on me. At least you know that your parents care. They care enough to give you rules."

That is pretty much where it all began with God. You see, the giving of the Commandments to Moses, is part of a much larger story of the Exodus and the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness, discovering their identity, and ending up in the Promised Land. The first sentence of our Old Testament lesson says it all and pretty much sums up the whole story. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery . . ." Their salvation, their being set free, their being chosen, elected some people might say, was not the result of their obedience to any sort of law. It is the result of God's amazing love and care for his people. Let's get that straight from the very beginning. God has cared with all his heart, and with all his soul, for his people. All the way down through time to you, to every one of you in this room, and to everyone who didn't make it today.

Rather, you see, the laws, the Commandments, outline the form which the grateful response of the people might take as a way of giving thanks for what God had already done for them. It is in those laws, those rules, those commandments that God reveals his identity, who he is, and what his purpose is. The God of the Commandments, is the one who intends freedom and well-being for you beloved, for Israel, for his people, for all his communities of faith. You see, life at its core, is interpersonal, built on relationships. The Commandments are guarantees that keep relationships honest, healthy, and functioning. The first relationship is that which the community of faith has with God, both collectively and individually. Now, what do you think of that? That God actually wants you to be in relationship with Him. If you can be in relationship with someone on Facebook, if can be in relationship with someone on the social network, people you have never seen and have no idea who they are, whose photos might even be phony, how come you can't be in relationship with God. Guess what? It doesn't require expensive electronic gadgets! It just requires taking some time in a quiet and comfortable place, and letting God know you are present and talking with him. Then, let it go from there and develop. It is the most amazing relationship you'll ever have in your whole life.

That relationship God insists, is to be exclusive, total, uncompromising. You see, the Commandments don't say there is only one God. They warn us, exactly the opposite! There are competing, rival, and even conflicting gods. So, what is the god that plaques your life? Your retirement account, getting a new iPod, moving up to the next model car, getting that wonderful dress, or going for some other fleeting commodity? God warns Israel not to have anything to with them.

Then comes the commandment about wrongful use of the name. It is not about vulgar or obscene language. It is, rather, about the use we make of God's name. It is a big temptation in the church and it might be a temptation in your life, and it is certainly a temptation in our nation, to call on God and to use his name as some sort of seal of approval for our plans, our projects, or our agendas.

At the center of all the commandments, is an amazing gift and you are already enjoying it now. The best hour in the week, folks. When you are in God's presence, whether you recognize it or not, right there, face to face, nose to nose, shoulder to shoulder. A gift that calls for worship, which is what we are doing now, and offers you for the first time in the week, true rest. Give yourself a break, don't work today, and do fun. Kids, if you have homework hanging over you, how come you didn't get that taken care of Friday evening, or Saturday morning?

The remainder of the Commandments address social relations, and the practices of the community concerning people and procession. We are given a divine ordering of life. You see, when life with God is rightly ordered, life in community is extremely healthy. We discover that our brothers and sisters are not objects and community to be used, but are full partners in this covenant, so they need to be treated with dignity, respect and justice. No matter what! It's strange how some people view the law as something to hinder our happiness, rather something designed to maximize it. Ask any mother or father, worth their salt, and the room is full of them. Can you tell that they do not make up rules just for kicks? They make rules to keep their kids of all ages safe, to enhance the peace and harmony of the home, and to strengthen family life together.

This is what Bob was only too keenly aware when talking with Richard Fairchild. Do you remember what he said? "My parents don't care about me. They've given up on me. You're lucky, your parents care so much about you they've made rules for you." So the law, these Ten Commandments, eleven, twelve, these commandments are "cords of love." They are sort of like fences, if you will, that mark out healthy boundaries, enabling us to live in safety and in freedom, so that we might live in peace and harmony.

Much later, in the Gospels, when Jesus is asked which is the most important commandment of all, he replies, "There are two. You shall love the Lord your God with all your health and mind and soul." What is the second one? Love your neighbor in the same way as you love yourself. Look what this traces. Love God, love your neighbor. What do you see? The cross. The ultimate expression of love.

The Rev. Charles Cook of Fayetteville, NC, served with the United States Army. He tells the story of day he arrived on a Boeing 707, in Vietnam. He writes that he noticed at the end of the runway a thousand little 3' wide depressions that I assumed to be craters caused by shelling. "Is that a minefield," I asked? "No, they are graves," said the senior NCO, "the Vietnamese Buddhists bury their dead sitting upright in the lotus position. Their graves are round. That's their graveyard."

Hearing the mechanical scrape of the landing gear deployed, I looked down up my new home. "There's your minefield, over to the left," said the NCO. It was not what I expected. What I saw looked like a beautiful soccer field. All around our compound were the flattest and greenest fields I had ever seen. They were as green and flat as the top of a billiard table . . . their moist greenness begged to be massaged by bare toes, to be played on, to be marked off for a game of football. The only problem was that they were deadly fields. These inviting fields were killing fields.

I remember one afternoon, not long after, seeing a group of kids playing stickball, right in the middle of one of those minefields. The MPs, who were supposed to be watching the fields, went colorless. They started yelling and screaming and waving their arms at those kids, who did not understand one word of English. It would have been funny, if it hadn't been so dangerous. One sweating MP quickly found a map of the field that gave the location of the mines, and his squad beat a careful route to the children. Grabbing the children, who were writhing and screaming in terror, they carefully began to retrace their steps back to the end of the minefield. At about the same time the children's parents arrived to see their kids flailing and hailing by a squad of MPs. At could only wonder at the terror of these children and their mothers, who were gesticulating in helpless anguish. They tried to run toward the children, but they were held back at the edge of the minefield by another squad of MPs.

These mothers, I am sure, believe their children were about to be killed. Actually, the opposite was happening. They could not realize that the MPs prohibition was infinitely more merciful than a thoughtless permission would have been. That night, as I lay on my cot, I wondered if, in the name of a shallow and indulgent love, the company commander had listened to the cries of those children. I tried to imagine him saying, "Oh, I'm sorry. We really did not mean to inconvenience you. Go ahead and finish your game of stickball." Would that really have been loving of the commander? As I lay awake on my cot, listening to explosions in the distance, I could not help wondering if the God of the Ten Commandments is less interested in spoiling His children's fun, than in giving them the map they need to steer clear of the minefields they will surely encounter as they journey through their lives.

Amen.