

(Trinity Sunday)

Rev. Scott Marrese-Wheeler
May 27, 2018

Exodus 19:1-6; 20:1-17
Decalogue (10 Words/Promises/Commandments)

While I was serving as pastor of Union Presbyterian Church in Monroe, a national controversy that was making its way into communities all around the United States and into Wisconsin made its way to that community via the Madison-based "Freedom from Religion Foundation".

The controversy was about numerous small monuments of the 10 Commandments that the Fraternal Order of the Elks had placed in city halls, public parks, county courthouses, and state capitol buildings back starting in 1956. However, behind the Elks Club donation of these stone tablet monuments was a "peerless self-promoter" named Cecil B. DeMille. His Hollywood movie - The Ten Commandments - was being released, and he was able to manipulate the Elks into footing the bill for all these monuments meant to promote his movie. It seems that these promotional monuments had less to do with the 10 Commandments and more to do with DeMille making money off of them.

I wonder how the One who originally gave the Commandments would feel about that?

Copies of the 10 Commandments have been printed, chiseled, etched, engrave and then placed in many locations around the world including the one above my head here in our sanctuary.

As for the "original" stone tablets, well, according to the story in Exodus, after God (YHWH) used his finger to write the Commandments on the stone tablets, Moses brought them down the Mt. Sinai to give to the people. But in a fit of anger over the behavior of the people who were worshipping a Golden Calf fashioned out of gold by Moses' brother, Aaron, Moses smashed the original ones. Later in Exodus 34 Moses goes back up the mountain to get a new set of the Commandments.

Upon bringing down the new second set of stone tablets, Moses instructs the Hebrew people to make a container to place them in. This is known as the Ark of the Covenant, which the Hebrew people carried with them throughout their wilderness wanderings until they finally made it across the River Jordan into the "Promised Land". They resided in a makeshift tent in the inner most part known as the "Holy of Holies" until King Solomon was able to build the first Temple to house them.

When that Temple was destroyed by Babylonians. They carted off the Ark as a spoil of war, only to return it when it caused them great suffering. A second Temple was built to house the Ark of the Covenant and then refurbished by King Herod, until it too was destroyed, this time by the Romans in 70 C.E.

Today, the location of the Ark of the Covenant and the stone tablets is a mystery. Legend has it that they reside somewhere beneath the last remaining wall of the Temple, also known as the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Others believe it was destroyed and will never be found. There are Indiana Jones' like archaeologists who are still in search of the Ark of the Covenant.

Whether the original stone tablets lie buried somewhere or not, the fact of the matter is that as a people of God, we still have them. And not because they are written on a wooden plaque hanging on our sanctuary wall, or engraved on a monument in some public location. It is

because, as the prophet Jeremiah (31:33) reminded us, God's Covenant is written upon our hearts, and kept at the forefront of our thoughts as we, God's people, live them out in relationship with God and our neighbors.

And living in relationship with God and neighbor is what the 10 Commandments are all about.

A Jewish Rabbi was asked by a student if he could recite the whole of Scripture standing on one leg. The Rabbi lifted a leg, and recited: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your should and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The rest is just commentary."

In a similar way, when asked by a lawyer which of all the commandments were the greatest, Jesus said: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole being is the greatest" and the second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as you do yourself."

Pressed further by the same lawyer as to who exactly was his neighbor, Jesus tells a story of a greatly despised and hated Samaritan, who unlike the others in the parable, who obey the law, stops to help, showing great empathy, compassion and mercy to the victim. Who was the neighbor, Jesus asks, and we know the answer, don't we, the one who showed mercy. Then Jesus says: "Go and do likewise, and you will live."

You would think that keeping 10 Commandments would be pretty simple and yet, if we are honest with ourselves, it is all that difficult.

Actually, Moses received far more than 10 Commandments from God up on Mt. Sinai. If you read through Exodus and Deuteronomy, you find many more. As Bruce Feiler says in his book, *Walking the Bible*, after God delivers the 10 Commandments, "thunder and lightning again surround the mountain, a horn blares and the mountain smokes" and God continues to speak the many other commandments. By some accounts, there are close to 613 more.

When I was attending Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, our Old Testament Professor, Eugene March, would read us some of these. They covered all sorts of things, from sanitary issues, what type of foods to eat, how to clean and prepare them, and which ones to avoid, how to tend to your crops to using the bathroom to having sex.

These make up the covenant contract between God and the people in what is known as the Book of the Covenant or the Torah. Obey these, keep them faithfully, God tells Moses then you and your family and your future generations will live.

While it would be interesting to explore all of these with you, we will focus on the most common 10 Commandments.

In Greek, these 10 are referred to as the Decalogue. In Hebrew it is "Debar" which translates as "Word". If we use the Hebrew translation we would know them as "the decade of words" or the "10 Words" of God.

We can refer to them as the "10 Words" of God or the "Decalogue" or the 10 Commandments. So there is that which we need to be mindful of, and then there is this, what is the correct order of the 10?

The Jewish, and yes, these are part of the Jewish Scriptures, the first commandment is "I am the Lord your God." If you are Catholic, Orthodox, or Lutheran the first commandment is "No other gods, and no graven images." If you are Protestant, Anglican, or Reformed, first

commandment is “No other gods” and the second is “no graven images.” Because of this, the other commandments, though familiar in wording, are slightly different in order.

Over the next Sundays, we will be exploring the Decalogue, Decade of Words, or Commandments. Hugh Drennan, who will be preaching for me on June 17 and 24, will also be contributing to this sermon series.

For now, let me share with you these thoughts about the whole of them.

They are a gift from God to us, so that we can learn how to live in relationship with our neighbors.

In his book, **Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America**, Chris Hedges (son of a Presbyterian minister) says: “The commandments save us from false covenants and contemporary idols that promise so much and deliver so little,” idols we readily worship - the state, the nation, the military, the flag, race, ethnicity, sex and money. Despite such ambiguities and complexities, the Ten Commandments are a moral compass that points us toward the true north of human health and wholeness. In neglecting them we lose our way. In this sense the Ten Commandments are promises that give life rather than prohibitions that repress.

“The commandments frame,” according to Hedges, “the most important questions we can ask, like the mystery of good and evil, the meaning of living in community, the nature of integrity, the meaning of fidelity, or the necessity of honesty. In honoring the commandments, we embrace the sanctity of life, the power of love, and their function to bind us together in life-affirming community.”