

FIRST LESSON: Exodus 20:1-17
SECOND LESSON: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
March 7, 2021
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

“The Covenant of the Law”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

This week as I was researching the Ten Commandments I came across a truly hilarious Blog by a woman named Karen Blessing. She offered:

“The 10 Commandments of My Home”:

1. I am your Mother. I went through hell to conceive you, used all the toilet paper in the land while carrying you and suffered a lengthy and excruciating ordeal to have you. You will accept me as your Mother or I will farm you out.
2. Thou shalt have no other mother besides me. I do not care how much nicer you think every other mother on the planet is; I am yours and you are stuck with me and only me.
3. Thou shalt not take the name of your mother in vain. Just so we're clear, this means you can't swear at me, OR call anyone else a mother... anything.
4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Give me a break, at the very least on the weekends.
5. Honor thy father and thy mother. Notice how I've generously included Dad in this one.
6. Thou shalt not kill. No matter what consequences you've suffered for whatever action you decided to take, you cannot have murderous thoughts towards me. Change your behavior, 'cause I'm here to stay.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery. If you even know what this is, you're grounded for life.
8. Thou shalt not steal. That means that what's mine is mine. You cannot take my things and then try to pretend I never had them. I KNOW it was there yesterday.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor. STOP blaming your brother. I'm not stupid, I know it was you.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house. Do well in school, get into college, get a good job and buy a bigger one.

Yeah. Don't mess with mom.

The third covenant in the Old Testament is the Mosaic covenant, sometimes called the Sinai Covenant because it was given on Mount Sinai. Although we have narrowly focused on the ten commandments today, the

whole covenant includes 613 laws. Here's where I would absolutely fail if I were born Jewish, because I would never be able to pull off keeping 613 rules. But these laws were not necessarily new to the people. Even back in the day of Abraham we hear of Abraham "keeping God's commandments, statutes and laws. (Gen. 26: 5) Although English translations often render the earlier word as "command" and not "commandment", it's the same word in Hebrew. What this event does is pull all of the commandments together in one place. It organizes and prioritizes what God wants of God's people. And the Ten Commandments, or Ten Words, appear to have the highest priority.

We have come to expect that the Ten Commandments come in the form of a clearly delineated list, numbered one through ten. But it is not that simple because Jews and Christians number them differently. In Hebrew they are called "Words" and the "First Word" in Judaism is a statement, "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." In Judaism verses 3-6 are the Second Word. For Catholics and some Protestants this is the First Commandment. Further complicating matters most Protestants regard verse 3 as the First Commandment and verses 4-6 as the Second Commandment. The content doesn't differ. Just the organizational assumptions.

When it comes to the Ten Commandments it is important for us to take note of the fact that unlike other ancient religious codes, half of these commandments focus not on how we behave towards God, but on how we behave towards each other. Other religions separated religion from ethics. But here we find that caring for one another is as important as caring for God. We cannot have one without the other. Furthermore, these commandments are part of a covenant within a covenant. The Mosaic covenant is a covenant with the children of Abraham. And it has a context. God begins by stating: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

If we combine Jewish and Protestant understanding the first commandment would be: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." God must come first. No other gods should take precedence before the true God—not other pagan gods or things that we make into gods. Like the exclusive claim that spouses have this is a one-on-one relationship. Humanly speaking if a third person gets involved it's called adultery. Spiritually it's called idolatry.

Following logically on from this is a command against making idols. Images of any creature, human or animal, shall not be worshipped. Muslims have taken this commandment to the extreme of forbidding any form of pictorial art in their mosques. It is all script and abstract design. It is quite beautiful, but also a very deliberate practice to avoid making an image that might be worshipped. While most protestants have not felt it necessary to go to this extreme, human beings do have a propensity to worship statues, places and things instead of God. Two things are specifically named in this command—a carved or graven image and a painted likeness or image.

We should realize that all of the other neighboring religions had statues and paintings of their gods everywhere. They filled private homes and town squares. They decorated everything from temples to taverns. To NOT have an

image of your god was unheard of. Israel was unique in the ancient world in refusing to do so.

We stay God focused in the next commandment. **“You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain.”** God’s character and identity are tied up in God’s name, so using God’s name to do something dishonorable would profane it. God’s name is believed to be so holy by many Jews that they do not speak it or write it. The name Yahweh appears to mean, “I am,” but no one really knows how Yahweh is pronounced because all we have are four consonants. Originally written Hebrew had only consonants. Vowels were created later. Once vowels were created the vowels for the word Adonai were superimposed on the consonants for Yahweh. It’s a convention indicating that Adonai, which means “Lord” should be said instead of Yahweh. Unfortunately, when you don’t know that and read it as written it comes out as “Yehovah” or “Jehovah”, a name that doesn’t actually exist. I challenge you to try to explain that to a Jehovah’s Witness. But while some Jews have shown a profound respect for God’s name, the rest of us are considerably shirking. We don’t even have to use God’s name as a curse word to profane God’s name. Using God’s name in an oath to misrepresent something violates God’s name, as in, *“I swear to God this is the best deal you will ever get!”* Or, *“I swear to God I didn’t do it!”* God’s name should never be connected to deception or dishonorable behavior.

We are to honor the sabbath day and keep it holy. This is another commandment that we never seem to keep. First of all, we changed the day to Sunday. Then we changed the rules about stores being closed on Sundays and now every day is like another. This is true everywhere except places in the deep south where you will still be hard pressed to find anything open on a Sunday. It was like that here when I was a little girl. And there is a lot to be said for that. Despite the convenience we now have of being able to shop on Sunday, that means someone else has to work. And human beings are not designed to work every day. We were created to need rest. God put rest into our week. And because God knew that human nature would say, “Fine, I get to rest but my servants still have to work,” God was very, very specific to include everyone.

The commandments now switch to focus on human interactions. The next commandment, “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you,” is one of the most misunderstood. This is NOT a commandment given to children. It is a commandment given to adult children. There was no social security back then, no pensions, no IRAs. Elderly parents unable to work anymore could literally freeze and starve to death on the streets if their children did not provide for them. And both fathers and mothers are included. Regardless of what kind of relationship we have had with our parents, it is our God-given responsibility to make sure they are taken care of.

“You shall not murder” is a better translation than “You shall not kill,” because the specific Hebrew word does not refer to killing in times of war, self-defense or criminal execution. We may oppose the death penalty for other reasons, but it doesn’t apply here. This is murder, wanton, brutal, malicious destruction of life.

“You shall not commit adultery,” is a commandment that has also changed throughout time. As applied originally it did not apply to a married man and an unmarried woman, because he could take her as a second wife or concubine. It only applied for men having an affair with a married woman, and of course, to all women. This was true in all of the religions and cultures of the ancient Middle Eastern world. Things began to change within Judaism as polygamy disappeared. Then the playing field was leveled for everyone else who converted to Christianity. It was, in fact, rather shocking for pagan married men to discover that they couldn’t sleep around with impunity. Today we have all seen the destructive impact of infidelity on families and children, regardless of which partner strays.

“You shall not steal,” includes violent theft and theft by deception. Bernie Madoff was a thief. Con artists targeting senior citizens are thieves. And stealing is one of the most selfish and self-centered of acts, because no thought whatsoever is given to the victim of the crime. The poorer the victim, the more devastating the damage.

“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” How do we do this? In court? Yes. But also in the neighborhood. Character assassination destroys lives. A reputation is much easier lost than regained. This is why politicians often just throw mud at their opponent even knowing full well that what they say is not true. They hope that some of it sticks. They know that even if that person is fully exonerated, people will remember with a vague sense of unease that something was wrong.

And finally, we are told not to covet anything that belongs to our neighbor. Interestingly, this is the only commandment that addresses a state of mind, not an action. And that is because envy is one of the most dangerous states of mind. Envy can breed all manner of evil things. Envy can lead to theft and murder, false witness and even adultery. The ancient world took envy very seriously. We don’t take it seriously enough. We even encourage it. Our advertisers say, “You’ll be the envy of all your neighbors.”

The covenant of the law was given for two reasons. The dietary laws are part of the Holiness Codes. In practice setting up strict codes concerning clean and unclean foods set Israel apart from the other nations. They made it very, very difficult to be assimilated. Some of the other laws in the Holiness codes make less sense to us. What exactly is wrong with wearing clothes made of two different kinds of material? How is it that a cotton-polyester blend is a sin? But the central ethical laws—the ten commandments, show us the nature of God. They reveal the things that are most important to God. We may be saved by grace and not by our ability to keep the law, but that doesn’t mean we disregard this part of scripture. Jesus didn’t. Christians today do not keep the Old Testament law. We don’t even keep all of the ten commandments if we are honest. But maybe we should rethink that—not to earn salvation—but to simply live in a way that is pleasing to God. Amen

Exodus 20:1-17

20 And God spoke all these words:

² “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

³ “You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹² “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

¹³ “You shall not murder.

¹⁴ “You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ “You shall not steal.

¹⁶ “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

¹⁷ “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;

the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”^[a]

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.