

Reclaiming the Ten Commandments
A Sermon on Exodus 20:1-20
Proper 22
October 8, 2017

Introduction

The Ten Commandments have become a political icon. Roy Moore made national headlines in 2000 when he was chief judge of the Alabama Supreme Court. He put up a monument of the Ten Commandments at his courthouse and defied a court order by a federal court to remove them. He was removed from office in 2003, but the voters in Alabama recently elected him as the Republican candidate for US Senate. The Oklahoma Supreme Court in 2015 ordered that a monument to the Ten Commandments be removed from the grounds of the Oklahoma State Capitol. Religious conservatives won't give up. They introduced a State Question in 2016 that was voted down by the people and another bill in the House in 2017.

Religious conservatives call the Ten Commandments God's law. They want it to be recognized as the law of the land. These are the same people who want to reclaim America for Christ. They don't seem particularly interested in following the Ten Commandments. They seem more interested in forcing other people to recognize what they call the Judeo-Christian heritage.

I struggled with the Ten Commandments this week. I usually decide on a direction for my sermon early in the week. This week, nothing. My struggle all week was, how can we reclaim the Ten Commandments? Do they have any good news for us today?

First Move: Healthy Boundaries

Let us start by considering how Jewish scholars understand the Ten Commandments. The Commentary for Reformed Judaism sees the events on Mount Sinai as the birth of Israel as a nation. God liberated the Hebrew slaves and provided them with manna and water in the wilderness, but the people as a people have not yet recognized God as their God. They do not yet worship God.

This is the first time that God reveals himself to the people of Israel. God descends on the mountain, taking the form of thunder and lightning. A cloud of smoke envelops the mountain. Fires break out and trumpets sound. The author describes God as a mysterious, powerful presence.

God speaks directly to the people. Exodus never calls them the Ten Commandments. It says, "God spoke all these words." Deuteronomy refers to them as the ten words. Perhaps that is one way we can start to reclaim the Ten Commandments. Call them The Ten Words instead. Refer to them as the Bible refers to them.

The Ten Words take the form of a covenant between God and all the people of Israel. This is not the first covenant that God has made. God established a covenant with Noah and his sons after the flood. God promised never again to wipe out all people through a flood. The rainbow was a sign of the covenant. Every time the rain fell from the heavens, there would be a rainbow to remind God of the covenant. That covenant was unilateral. This covenant has mutual obligations. The Ten Words reveal God's will for the people, and the people agree to obey. For the first time, a code of morality is seen as the will of God.

God reminds the people what he has done for them. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." God begins, not by reminding them that he is the creator of heaven and earth, but that he heard their cries and liberated them. God has a special relationship with them. God says in Exodus 19, "You are my treasured possession." God is establishing a personal relationship with the people. Even though he addresses all the people, he uses the second person singular throughout this speech. God addresses each of the Israelites individually.

The first commandment makes this personal relationship concrete: "You shall have no other gods before me." I shall be your God and you shall be my people.

Mary and I attended a workshop yesterday on Healthy Boundaries. It was at the Regional Church. All pastors are required to take this workshop to get standing. It turned out to be a God thing. It gave me a new way of understanding the Ten Commandments.

Boundaries are a way of respecting others so that you can have a healthy relationship with them. They are a way of preserving the self within relationship. Boundaries are not intended to shackle us. They are not a set of rules. Do this. Don't do this. They are guidelines for ministers on how to act with their parishioners. The people of the congregation give the minister power to be their spiritual leader. We hold power in sacred trust for the benefit of the congregation. Healthy boundaries protect our parishioners from ministers who would abuse their power. Boundaries free us to do our work as spiritual leaders.

We can't get King James out of our heads when we think of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not." It sounds like we are being scolded. Instead of

thinking of them as rules, look at them as limits. The Ten Commandments, or the Ten Words, set healthy boundaries for the people of Israel, for their relationship with God and their relationship with each other.

Second Move: The Ten Words

The Ten Commandments were written on two tablets. The first four commandments set boundaries on the people's relationship with God. Those were on the first tablet. The last six commandments were on the second tablet—they fix boundaries on people's relationships with each other.

The second commandment says, you shall not make an image of God. This would be a restriction on God's freedom. God cannot be reduced to a drawing or a statute. One of the Jewish commentators suggests this is because Israelite art in this era is primitive as compared to other peoples. The Israelites have no problem describing God in literature, but they are forbidden to draw a picture of God.

God says, you are not to bow down to these artistic images or serve them. "I, Yahweh, your God, am a jealous God." For the first time, God's relationship with the people is compared to the relationship of a married couple. The husband is jealous of the wife if she sees other men. Later on, the prophets will often compare idolatry by the people to adultery.

The point is, you are not showing proper respect for God if you do this. You are crossing a healthy boundary.

The third commandment is one that Jews take very seriously, more seriously than Christians. King James translates it as, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Christians have often reduced this to you shall not use God as part of a swear word, like with the word damn. Everett Fox has a more literal translation, "You are not to take up the name of Yahweh your God for emptiness." Do not say the name of God lightly. Jews will not even say the name Yahweh. They believe it is too sacred for humans to utter.

The fourth commandment is the longest and it is unique among all legal codes. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. If they are to remember the Sabbath, it must already have been a tradition. The only evidence we have of that in the Bible is in the story about manna—gather twice as much on the sixth day and none on the seventh.

The people are to honor the Sabbath because that is part of who God is. God rested on the seventh day of creation. There are healthy limits to how much every one should work. No one should work on the Sabbath: not you, not your son, not your daughter, not your servant, not your maid, not your beast, or your sojourner that is within your gates. You cannot work and you cannot ask anyone else to work, not even

your animals, not even the sojourner or the alien, who was the most vulnerable person in society.

The first four commandments emphasize the freedom and sovereignty and character of God. The last six commandments set limits on how people should treat each other in community.

The community is made up of households or families. The fifth commandment is to honor your father and your mother. Not obey them, but honor them, give weight to them. Don't drive them out of your home when they can no longer work. Care for them in their old age. That was the custom in all Jewish and Christian households for the next 2,500 years. There was no such thing as independent living or assisted living or nursing homes until the last century. People lived with their children when they got old. When my father was growing up, both of his grandfathers lived with him. That was Social Security in those days.

The next three commandments are stated in staccato form. They are two syllables each in Hebrew. Kill not. Cheat not. Steal not. These rules were not unique to Jews. Cultures throughout the ancient Near East had law codes that included rules against murder, adultery and theft. There was a universal recognition that people could not live together in society unless they had these boundaries.

The ninth commandment has a courtroom setting. If someone is accused of murder or adultery or theft, do not give false testimony in court. The courts cannot uphold the boundaries for a healthy society unless people testify truthfully.

The tenth commandment is about your desires. Everett Fox translates it as, "You are not to desire the house of your neighbor, you are not to desire the wife of your neighbor, or his servant, or his maid, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's." Again, God is setting limits on people's acquisitiveness and maintaining order in the community. Do not work on the Sabbath and do not desire what belongs to your neighbor.

The people of Israel react as if they had not even heard the ten words spoken by God. They are terrified of the theophany: the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking. They ask Moses to speak to God for them from now on. "You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us or we will die."

Pastors assumes the role of Moses on behalf of the congregation. Each week in preparing our sermons, we go up the mountain to wrestle with the word of God and come back down to bring it to the congregation.

The Ten Commandments are a preamble to a code of laws in Chapters 21 through 25 of Exodus. Moses goes up the mountain to receive the code of laws from

God, then comes back down to deliver them to the people. The Ten Commandments set forth basic principles around which their society will be organized. No punishments are set forth—only healthy boundaries. What sets the Ten Words apart from other law codes is that they put obligations to the community first. It is not about entitlements, but what is good for the community.

Third Move: A Higher Righteousness

The Beatitudes are the New Testament version of the Ten Commandments. Matthew describes Jesus as a figure like Moses, who goes onto a mountain to teach the people about a higher righteousness. Just as the Ten Commandments are the preamble to a code of laws, the Beatitudes are the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount.

During the controversy about putting the monument of the Ten Commandments on the lawn at the Oklahoma State Capitol, I questioned why religious conservatives were putting all their energy into the Ten Commandments instead of the Sermon on the Mount. I wish they would focus as much on living out the Beatitudes as they do in forcing the state to recognize the Ten Commandments. Nobody has ever accused the religious conservatives of a higher righteousness, just a higher self-righteousness.

I would like to spend the rest of our time together talking about two of the commandments that can lead us to a higher righteousness: honoring the Sabbath and curbing our desires.

Jews have honored the Sabbath. That is a distinctive part of their culture. Abby Jacobson, who will preach here next week on the golden calf, bought a home in Crown Heights just a few blocks away from her synagogue so that she could walk to the synagogue on Saturday instead of driving a car. Jews, especially Orthodox and conservative Jews, avoid doing work on the Sabbath. It is a day for spending time with God and spending time with your family.

Worship and self-care. Christian should embrace that, too. They are healthy boundaries.

Worship is a healthy way to respond to the Ten Commandments. We keep the commandments out of gratitude and praise rather than servile submission to an arbitrary deity. We recognize that everything we have is manna from heaven. The covenant is an act of love on both sides. God hears our cries and provides for us. We accept God's gifts and pledge our loyalty to the covenant. We come together as the people of God on Sunday to lift our voices together in praise of God.

As we progress in our faith journey, worship becomes a part of our daily routine instead of something that we do on Sunday. We make time each day to be with God, through prayer and reading the Bible.

Self-care means being intentional about taking time off for your self. We need to take at least a day off from work each week, preferably a day and a half or two. You can get more done in six days a week than you can in seven. Self-care preserves the self. It is a way of acknowledging and providing for our needs so that we can have healthy relationships with God and family and neighbor.

Curbing our desires is at the heart of Christian spirituality. That seems to be in conflict with providing for our needs, but they are actually compatible. Curbing our desires is a way of letting go of the stuff we don't really need. Your neighbor's stuff is a good place to start. Don't worry about keeping up with your neighbor. We live in Edmond—it is really hard to keep up with your neighbor. My car and my television set are ten years old. Mary and I had flip phones until two years ago, though I must admit, iPhones are really useful.

Curbing your desires is a way of curbing your false self. You are more than what you own. You are more than your accomplishments. You are more than what other people think of you. Your true self is how God sees you. The true self is the common humanity that all people share—it is what connects us with God and with each other. In the intensely political and divisive times we live in, we focus on our differences with people instead of what we have in common.

Finding our true self tears down the walls that separate us from God and from each other. Those walls are unhealthy boundaries. They are built by the false self that idolizes itself instead of living in authentic relationship with God and neighbor.

Conclusion

The Ten Commandments establish a sacred community. God's hope is for the people of Israel to be "a special treasure from among all peoples, . . . , a kingdom of priests, a holy nation."

The Ten Commandments establish healthy boundaries for the people so that they can be a kingdom of priests, set apart for service to God.

Putting a monument to the Ten Commandments at the State Capitol is worshipping a false idol. The Ten Words instead should be written in our hearts. Then we can be a blessing to all nations.