

**Sermon Year B Lent 3 The 10 commandments: do they still make sense for us today? Based on Exodus 20:1-17**

So, there's this is a little known tale of how God came to give the Jews the Ten Commandments. God first went to the Egyptians and asked them if they would like a commandment. "What's a commandment?" they asked. "Well, it's like, THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY," replied God. The Egyptians thought about it and then said, "No way, that would ruin our weekends." So then God went to the Assyrians and asked them if they would like a commandment. They also asked, "What's a commandment?" "Well," said God, "It's like, THOU SHALT NOT STEAL." The Assyrians immediately replied, "No way. That would ruin our economy." So finally God went to the Jews and asked them if they wanted a commandment. They asked, "How much?" God said, "They're free." The Jews said, "Great! We'll take TEN!"<sup>1</sup>

Well, that's not exactly how the bible tells the story, but I thought it a great introduction to the 10 commandments, and the joke came from a Jewish Joke website!

Now each Sunday since we started Lent, the stories in the lectionary's Old Testament scriptures have focused on how God covenanted, how God promised to love, care, guide and generally watch over the people of God's creation. God made everlasting covenants, rather like a contract or treaty with God's people, first with Noah and his descendants to never flood the earth again, then 10 generations later with Abraham and Sarah. The Lord promises their offspring will become a multitude of nations; and they will become the Lord's chosen people, a holy nation, a binding promise of God's grace with them forever. Abraham & Sarah's great grandchildren, the 12 sons of their grandson Jacob, become the founding tribes of Israel. A few generations later, the progeny of the 12 tribes have become enslaved by the Egyptians. God sends Moses to free the Israelites from slavery, and lead them to the Promised Land. And that's where we are today in our Exodus story. Moses and the people have made camp at the foot of Mount Sinai, and God calls Moses up the mountain and tells him to remind the people of just who rescued them from slavery and chose them to be God's holy nation. Along with this message, God also provides Moses with 10 commandments, 10 teachings for this holy nation to live by. This is God's way of reminding them of their covenantal agreement, a clarifying of the terms of the contract, you could say. Rather like God's saying: "I agreed to be your God, you agreed to be my people, so now you need to know and understand **how** to be my people."

This is a vision of order for the life of God's people<sup>2</sup>. These are more than laws guiding how to behave, more than just a list of 'thou shalt' or 'thou shalt not's'. These commandments are God's gift to the people God has chosen to be a holy nation, these teachings are a blessing from God, a formation for holy living, a way of life.

If you look at these teachings in a general way, they are inherently relational, they describe how to keep company with, how to be in relationship with others. The first four define and explain how to be in relationship with God, the other six, explain how to keep good relations with each other.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jokes4us.com/ethnicjokes/jewishjokes/10commandmentsjoke.html> Accessed March 3, 15

<sup>2</sup> Craig Kocher, Pastoral Perspective on Commentary for Exodus 20: 1-17 in [Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 2](#) p. 78

But these commandments are more than 2 millennia old, and we live in a different place and time. So can something this old, even if it is from God, still make sense for us today?

Well, let's first look at the four that express how we are to be in relationship with God.

**1.** *You shall have no other gods before me.* **2.** *You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.*

These first 2 seems pretty easy at first glance. Our religious beliefs as Christians don't include a bunch of different gods that we pray to. Nor do we carve or create images of things and worship them. So, we can ignore them then, right? Maybe not so fast. What is the essence of this commandment about god's and idols? Well, you could say that they get in between, in the way of us and our worship of the Almighty God, the God of all gods, the one who created us, and provides for us, the source of all that is. So God first, no-one and nothing else is worthy of our worship, our absolute loyalty, love, trust and devotion. That's what worship is at its best, absolute loyalty, love, trust and devotion. Which begs the question: Is there anything in our lives that comes first, that comes between us and God? What does our society today say about whom and what is number one? What things do we really idolize, or put our trust in, or put first in our lives, before our relationship with God? A bank account, or job, our possessions, the way we look...I'm sure we can each name a few....

**3.** Wrongful use or misuse of God's name. Here's a helpful definition I found: "Probably includes breaking promises, telling lies after swearing to tell the truth, using the LORD's name as a curse word or a magic formula, and trying to control the LORD by using his name."<sup>3</sup> Do we always use the Lord's name in a respectful fashion? We say 'O My God' so often that it's been abbreviated to OMG to make for easier and faster texting and emailing. Abbreviating it doesn't make it any less wrongful.

**4.** *Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. To keep a holy Sabbath means to keep a day that is dedicated to God; that is focused on God. How do you keep any relationship healthy? Well, any counsellor will tell you good relationships take time and work, and that includes our relationship with God, with Jesus. As the creation story goes, even God rested on the seventh day from all God's labours, and we too need rest to rejuvenate, a day to rest in body, mind and spirit. I don't think I'm going too far out on a limb by saying in this 24/7 world, we seem to have lost the idea of Sabbath completely, so not too hard to consider that many have even lost the idea of who and what God is, never mind how to be in relationship with the Lord. It's almost a quaint notion to spend a day a week in rest and relationship with God.*

This moves us into the second group of commandments, those that define how we are to live in community with one another, how to be in relationship with others. Interesting that this grouping begins with the fifth commandment,

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<sup>3</sup> Footnote to Exodus 20: 17 from the [Contemporary English Version](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+20%3A+1-17&version=CEV). <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+20%3A+1-17&version=CEV>

*Honor your father and your mother.* To honour is to respect, children are to respect both dad **and** mom, a pretty equalizing statement in a world that was defined by patriarchy. And children grow up and become parents, parents become grandparents. What a lovely and simple way to say that a family's job is to respect its elders, ensuring care throughout the generations, for men **and** women. I heard a Doctor being interviewed on CBC one time, and he said that 'respect is love in plain clothes'<sup>4</sup>. I liked that, says it all, doesn't it? Respect and love, are the basis of all relationships!

6. *You shall not murder* is the way the NRSV translates the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment. Murder is killing that is deemed socially unacceptable, what we call homicide.<sup>5</sup> While this seems a simple and basic human right, and sometimes is blatantly obvious, we continue to struggle with how to define this today in our parliament and in faith communities. Is killing in war murder? What about Doctor assisted suicide, abortion, contraception, and the debate that these issues have caused within many faith communities, including ours. This is a difficult one, one for which I have no pat answer either.

7. *You shall not commit adultery.* This can be seen as something very straightforward, thou shalt not, period. But it's not always that clear-cut or simple. Other translations say it this way: 'be faithful in marriage'. But in a highly sexualized and permissive society such as the one in which we live, where the definition of marriage itself is under question, where 40% of marriages end in divorce<sup>6</sup>; and even what adultery is can potentially be a hotly contested question. It can be very complex, because people and their relationships are complex, and emotions are complex. Adultery impacts more than just the 2 people two people involved, causing pain, damaging relationships in the family and social circles.

Faithfulness is also respectfulness—ahh, there's that word again!

8. *You shall not steal.* This is a basic premise is to ensure protection of property and maintain order within the community, and a law that remains with us today. This too is a way of respecting the other by respecting their property.

9. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.* Here's how a bible scholar describes this commandment. "If the falsely accused and the vulnerable cannot have recourse to impartial judges who receive accurate information from credible witness, then society is indeed at risk."<sup>7</sup> This remains the cornerstone of our judiciary even today. What's this commandment at its most basic level? Don't lie.

10. *You shall not covet your neighbour's house, wife, slave, ox, donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbour.* This commandment takes things up a notch. This goes beyond the basic dos and don'ts, this touches our deep desires. Coveting is more than admiring something, or being greedy. It's wanting something, desiring it so badly, that it actually changes how we behave; how we attain what we covet becomes the focus of our lives or the force that drives us to get it. It's what keeps the western world's economy going. After all, how can you possibly keep up with the Joneses if you don't covet what they have? Wanting what others have and we don't is part of our basic human condition, right back to

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Mike Evans, in interview with Wei Chen, CBC Ontario Morning, Mar 6, 2015

<sup>5</sup> W. Sibley Towner, Exegetical Perspective on Commentary for Exodus 20: 1-17 in Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 2 p. 78

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/4-in-10-1st-marriages-end-in-divorce-report-1.953894> accessed Feb. 26.17

<sup>7</sup> Towner

the Garden of Eden. The bible is full of such stories. Coveting has ruined more lives and destroyed more people, has even caused wars. To covet something is desire to the extreme. It's power tripping to the max.

So, what do we as people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, trying to be good Christians do about these commandments? I hope I've helped you to consider them as still relevant for today. And as Christians, when we question something, it's always a good thing to start with Jesus, isn't it? When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment of all the laws of Moses was, what did he say?

“You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” *(Matt 22: 37-40 NLT)*

Loving God, and loving each other. Huh! And we have 10 teachings that do just exactly that!

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