

Rev. Lynne Ogren
March 4, 2018

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
2nd Sunday in Lent, Year B

Exodus 20:1-17

Let us pray. Grant us, O God, to hear your voice, and in hearing your voice to love your word, and in loving your word to do your will through Christ our Lord. Amen

This season our Sunday readings take us through a series of what we are calling covenant passages. The first Sunday we heard the covenant God made with Creation after the Flood, promising never to destroy the earth like that again, but instead to save the world from within, being in relationship with humanity and all creation.

Last Sunday was the story of the covenant God established with Abraham and Sarah, a covenant that would lead to the people and nation known as Israel. These descendants of Abraham and Sarah ended up in Egypt where they were made slaves. After God brought them out of Egypt into freedom and into their time of wilderness wandering, God reinforces the covenant made with Abraham by giving them what we call the Ten Commandments.

As Christians we still hold these words in high regard. But sometimes we use them as a gauge to determine our level of holiness or to scold and condemn one another. The language of this passage comes across as demanding or commanding, which is why we call them the Ten Commandments.

But what if we saw them as God's gift to us, gifts which we can then give to one another? So take out your handout and let's take a fresh look at these important words.

The best gift we can give and receive is the gift of trust. God begins by assuring us that we can trust God to be God for us with the words, "I am the LORD your God." This is the same covenant God made with Abraham and Sarah. God promises to be our God no matter what. In these words to Israel we have today, God spells out how God's commitment to us will form us into the kind of trustworthy people God created us to be.

The first few commandments are what are sometimes known as the first tablet. They speak to our relationship with God.

1. You shall have no other gods.
2. You shall not make any idols. (Martin Luther put those two together in the Small Catechism as the first commandment but we'll keep them separate for today.)
3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.

These teachings are gifts from God both for our relationship with God AND for our relationships with our neighbors. Let's see how these first tablet teachings connect to the second tablet, the teachings about how we are to live with our neighbors.

1. You shall have no other gods. This teaching connects us with the commandment that calls us to honor our father and mother. God is our ultimate authority. God has also given us the gift of people who serve in authoritative roles for us. The first of these is our parents. Luther expanded his explanation of the honoring of parents to include “others in authority.” Human societies are made up of various roles, some of which have authority over others. God’s intention is that parents and others in authority look out for the best interest of those in their care. But we all know that sometimes that happens, and sometimes it doesn’t.

For those of us who find ourselves in these authoritative positions, we must remember that we are God’s servants in these roles, executing God’s justice, grace, and mercy. When we respect the people in positions that serve us in these ways, we are living out both God’s teaching to honor God and to honor our parents and those in authority. And if we find we disagree with those God has placed over us, we are called to work with them to bring about the change we feel needs to be made.

2. You shall not make for yourself an idol...You shall not bow down to them or worship them. When God is the only god we worship, we do not need the gods of this world that cause us to harm our neighbor. The god of status causes us to feel threatened by our neighbor so we want to kill them or bring them down. The god of sex leads us away from our covenants made in marriage. The god of possessions or the need for “stuff” makes us gather more and more, even at the expense of taking it from others.

When God is the only god we know and love and worship, the temptations of status, sex, and stuff have no power over us. We come to recognize that God has given us what we need—the skills and talents for the work we do, our families and friends, and the means to get what we need for a full and happy life. We are free, then, to love our neighbor in ways that respect and support them, that honor their relationships, and that help them keep and protect what is theirs.

3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God. Luther teaches that we are to use God’s name to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God. In these ways we show our respect for God and for the ways the world sees God through us. When we respect God’s name in this way we come to respect the name and reputation of our neighbor and choose to use our neighbor’s name only to speak well of them. Luther says we are called to defend our neighbor, to speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.

This teaching may be one of the most difficult. We all have our judgments based on our own experiences and perspectives. Our love and care for God’s name leads us to love and care for the name of our neighbor, and building up their character rather than tearing it down.

4. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. God teaches us that there is a need for rest and for worship. This weekly day of rest and worship turns our hearts again to God as we intentionally place our trust in God’s care and keeping for us. When we trust in God for all of our needs, we are no longer drawn to look across the fence at our neighbor and covet what they have. We learn to be content with who we are and how we fit into the

community God has given us to live with. We learn to contribute to that community with our time, our talent, and our treasures. And we learn to be thankful for the ways our neighbors are part of the diversity of that community.

I am the LORD your God. These words are a great and powerful gift to us. They transform our hearts to love and worship God alone. They turn our lives into acts of kindness and grace to our neighbors. And they set our minds on the gifts and blessings we have from God.

In this season of Lent, as we approach the cross once again, we see in Jesus the lengths God will go to embody God's love and commitment for this world—a commitment that is not dependent on how well we keep these commandments.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we can trust in God's forgiveness for us when we fall short of living in the ways God intends. This forgiveness is another gift we have to share with one another as trustworthy people of God.

May the ways we live in community with our neighbors be a sign of God's love for the world to see.

Thanks be to God! Amen

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Congregation handout

You shall have no other gods.

Honor your father and mother, *and those in authority.*

You shall not make any idols.

You shall not murder, commit adultery, or steal.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house...or anything that belongs to your neighbor.