

A Definition for Life
Exodus 20:1-17
March 4, 2018 – Third Sunday in Lent

Today's Hebrew Bible reading is among the best known of all the Old Testament Scriptures – The Ten Commandments. If you're like me, you had to memorize The Ten Commandments in Confirmation Class. But having said that, I repeatedly tell the classes that I teach not to take scripture out of context. Indeed, one of the shortcomings of our Christian worship service is that we only hear scripture read ten or fifteen verses at a time. We typically don't sit down and read an entire book of the Bible in one sitting.

A few years back, I challenged our congregation at some time during Lent, to sit down and read the entire Gospel of Mark in one sitting, beginning to end. It will take about an hour and a half. I again "suggest" that might make a great Lenten devotional. But back to The Ten Commandments. Let us put The Ten Commandments into context.

God has heard the cries of the people; and God has called Moses to lead the people out of Egypt to a new life in the area west of the Jordan River. Moses has answered the call. The plagues have happened. The Passover has happened. Pharaoh has relented. The Israelites have crossed the Red Sea; and are now wondering, lost in the Sinai wilderness. And so, Moses climbs a mountain and has another conversation with God; and, as a result of that conversation, God gives Moses the Ten Commandments.

Now, in this context, the Ten Commandments are not simply rules to live by. Yes, when I memorized the Ten Commandments at the age of twelve, I saw them as rules to live by; and I suspect that most people see them as rules to live by. But, taken in context, the Ten Commandments are much more than simply rules to live by. You see, at this point in the story, the people are wondering, lost in the wilderness; and the Ten Commandments provide a definition for life, a definition of what it means to be the people of God. The Ten Commandments not only tell us how we should live, they tell us how we should be in relationship – in relationship with God and in relationship with each other.

As they are usually written, the Ten Commandments appear on two tablets – five on the first and five on the second; and a careful examination of the commandments will show that the first tablet is about our relationship with God, and the second tablet will tell of our relationship with each other, with community.

Tablet One. . . I am the Lord, your God who brought you out of slavery. Nothing should come before me. And the second commandment relates very closely to the first. . . Don't make any false Gods – love only me. Friends, I've preached entire sermons on these two commandments, on how we in the twenty-

first century treat our “stuff” or other people as if they were Gods; at times even putting them before the love, worship and praise of the only true God.

Commandment Three – Don’t take the name of God in vain. Don’t toss the name of God or God’s Son around casually, or in a profane manner, or as if it had no significance. If you love God, you will love and respect God’s name. Yes, I’ve preached an entire sermon on this one also.

Commandment Four – Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. I don’t think I’ve ever preached about this, but maybe I should. What’s it mean? I believe there is a two-fold significance to this. First, we are called to set aside time for God, time for worship, time for prayer. We all need our God-time. That may be Sunday, or it may be another time; but we must be intentional about keeping Sabbath. The second part of this is more personal. God knows we all need our rest. Our twenty-first century culture is increasingly demanding that people, especially professional people be on-the-clock twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I have a nephew who was a lawyer of one of Cleveland’s major law firms. He was fully expected, if the phone rang at 3:00 a.m. and it was a client, he was to get up, answer the call and deal with the situation. His firm told him that he certainly was entitled to two weeks vacation every year, as long as he took his cell phone and his laptop with him on vacation and dealt with any calls from clients while he was gone. To my nephew’s credit, he gave up this prestigious job and high paying salary for a healthier environment where he had time with his family and time to rest. Friends, stress is a major killer in our nation today; so, God tells us, take Sabbath. Take time to rest. Take some quiet time to be in relationship with God.

Commandment Five – Honor your father and mother. This is not always easy. Unfortunately, there are some fathers and mothers in our society that are difficult to honor. Still, these are the people that brought us into life; and that life is a gift from God. The command to honor our fathers and mothers is a recognition of God’s gift of life. And so, we are called to honor, even if we cannot always respect their actions. We are called to thank God for the gift given through the person of father and mother. And so, you see, even commandment five is ultimately about God.

Then we come to the second tablet – commandments six through ten. Remember, at this point, the Israelites are a bunch of lost souls wondering in the desert. So commandments six through ten tell them and us how to live in community. They establish ground rules for that community: Don’t kill; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t tell lies against others in the community; don’t covet, don’t strongly desire that which is not yours. These still make a pretty good guide for Christian communion.

Two tablets – one about our relationship with God and one about our relationship with each other: God’s instruction to establish order among the wonderers.

About twelve hundred years later, Jesus was asked about the commandments. Within the corpus of Jewish law, there are a lot more than ten commandments. It’s actually a Trivial Pursuit question: How many commandments are in the Hebrew Bible – Answer: 613. And Jesus is asked which is the greatest. He only gives two commandments: One from Deuteronomy – Love the Lord your God with all your Heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength; and the second from Leviticus – Love your neighbor as yourself. (Yes, a couple weeks ago I told you that the later is actually two commandments: Love your neighbor; and love yourself; but that’s another sermon that you’ll be hearing in about a month.) But, do you see the correlation – Tablet One: Love God; and, Tablet Two: Love your neighbor.

Then, comes the 1700’s, and a fellow named John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement. Wesley looked at eighteenth century English society and developed three general rules for living: 1) Do no evil; 2) Do all the good you can at every time you can in every way you can for everyone you can; and, 3) Stay in love with God. Again, John Wesley instructs us to Love God and Love our Neighbor.

In your bulletin this week, you’ll find a book mark with an abbreviated version of the General Rules on one side and the Wesley Covenant Prayer on the other. I hope you will use this bookmark during your devotional time this Lent. Pray the prayer. Then, consider the General Rules.

It’s easy to say, “Oh I don’t do evil,” but I fear we all do some evil. Does any of us really take as good of care of the environment as we might? Does any of us really take as good of care of our bodies as we might? Does any of us really speak out against the evils of our government, or corporations, or the entertainment industry, or society in general as we might? Yes, I fear that to one degree or another, we all contribute to the evils around us.

And still, this Lent, I ask you to be positive and proactive. Avoid the evils, but consider Rule #2 – How can each of us do more good? How can we as a community, as a church, and as individuals do more good? Again, I caution – take care of yourselves. The goal here is not to increase anyone’s stress level; but it is to do more good and to find the joy in doing good.

And finally, and most importantly, Rule #3 – your bookmark says, “Practice the Spiritual Disciplines.” Bishop Ruben Job, in his book *Three Simple Rules* summarized Rule #3 as “Stay in Love with God” and I like that. Indeed, the Spiritual Disciplines are ways in which we can “stay in love with God,” ways in which we can come into an ever closer relationship with God and Jesus Christ.

I hope that this Lent, you will make your relationship with Christ a prime objective. And I hope that you will come out of Lent, so that after Easter you will continue to live in the joys of that fuller, richer relationship with Christ that will last you the rest of your life.

It's actually a song from the 1971 folk-rock musical Godspell, but the lyrics come from a 13th century English bishop - Saint Richard of Chichester.

I use those lyrics today as our closing prayer.

Let us pray. . .

Day by day,
Dear Lord, three things I pray:
To see thee more clearly,
Love thee more dearly,
Follow thee more nearly,
Day by day. Amen.

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