

Lent 3B, March 7, 2021, Exodus 20:1-17

Grace to you and peace in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Our first reading this morning contains some of the most recognized and most-often referred to words in all of scripture, Old Testament or New. I'd like to say they are also some of the best-known words of scripture, but considering many of the things I see going on in our society, saying they are recognized and referred to is about the best I can do.

I am often puzzled when I hear of people getting up in arms when the Ten Commandments are removed from schools and public places when very few of them have ever taken the time and effort to instill them, by teaching or by example, in their own families. The similar treatment of the Lord's prayer is another example of wanting some public entity to enforce the tenets of our Christian faith upon society as whole, be they Christian or not. If we expect future generations to live by the faith we confess, we must each take personal responsibility for teaching and living that faith daily. That is precisely why "God spoke all these words", so that we would have a concise and clearly defined set of principles to pass on from to generation and not have to depend on others to do it for us.

On the other hand, we must be careful that in teaching the Commandments we don't reduce our faith to a kind of legalism defined by how well we follow the rules. Rules are important to guide us through life, teaching us right from wrong, but depending on following the rules to bring us salvation is exactly the kind of behavior for which Jesus most often criticized the Pharisees and other religious elite of his day.

God gave the Ten Commandments to set boundaries for the protection of God's beloved people, not as an excuse to punish them. The words of Exodus 20 are spoken to a people with whom God had been in relationship for generations. The Lord is, after all, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The people had already obeyed some of the Lord's commands and God had already acted on their behalf.

It's clear from the beginning that God speaks these words to a community that shares in a close relationship with the Lord. God declares, "I am the Lord, YOUR God." This is a personal declaration from God to the people of Israel, and now to us as God's people in the 21st Century. The commandments are not simply rules, they are rules intended to make life in the community of faith a rich and rewarding experience, an experience of justice, equality, and ultimately, an experience of love.

God reminds the Israelites of his love for them by reminding them of how they were freed from slavery in Egypt and delivered to the Promised Land long before they were given the commandments. We are reminded during this Lenten season of how Jesus died for us long before we were conceived in our mothers' wombs. Our response to the Commandments and to the rest of God's expectations of us is our response to the grace, mercy, and love already given to us by our loving Heavenly Father. We don't live the Commandments to avoid punishment, we live the Commandments because we love the Lord who gave them to us. To paraphrase Martin Luther, we love and trust God because God trusts loves us.

The commandment to not murder is the is the most direct in emphasizing the value of life, especially life lived in relationship with one another and with God, but the other Commandments show the importance of relationship as well.

The Commandment to keep the Sabbath gives us the opportunity to put aside the work and worries of the world for one day each week and cultivate our relationships with God and one another. How sad it is that the tradition of Sunday visits with family and friends has become so rare these days.

It is not always easy to literally follow the command to honor one's father and/or mother, but again, the intent of the command is more important than the letter. Honoring one's father or mother, or those others in authority included by Luther might call for forgiveness, understanding, and prayers for healing for parents and self alike, and the example we set is the example likely to be followed by our children and their children, and their children, for generations to come, for good or for ill.

Love and trust in relationship to community is the aim of the commandments against adultery, stealing, false witness, and coveting. It's easy to see why, when asked what commandment is the greatest, Jesus didn't name one of the 613 Levitical laws or even one of the so-called "Top Ten", instead he summed them all up in two, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."

The Ten Commandments are a sort of legal document that expects a right response on our part. But they are also a document of love, given to us by a loving God to guide our relationship with God and with one another. They are not to be merely recognized or referred to; they are meant to be lived. It's nice to have them displayed in schools and courthouses, but if we hope to make a real difference in the world, we must display them in our life! Amen.