



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Can You Image? An Introduction to the Ten Commandments”

Exodus 19:16-25

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When did the Ten Commandments get so large and unwieldy?

In 2002, the then-chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court waged and lost a fight to keep a Ten Commandments monument in his courthouse. Let me tell you how much this monument of his weighs: 5,280 pounds, or just over 500 pounds per commandment.¹

When did the Ten Commandments get so large and unwieldy? It’s hard to say the words “Ten Commandments” without a certain heaviness and weariness in our voices. This seems like a good time to announce that we are going to do a five-week sermon series on the commandments. Next Sunday, a four-week adult class begins in Palmer Hall. It could have been worse. It could have been a ten-week series. We have only five weeks of rules, regulations, laws. I can sense the enthusiasm in the room.

When did the Ten Commandments get so large and unwieldy?

And when did they become so politicized? On one side you have folks who claim that the posting of the Ten Commandments in public places is the solution to all of this nation’s problems and will help restore this nation’s Biblical foundation. On the other side of the debate are those who believe that any posting of the Ten Commandments violates the separation of church and state and is an affront to core American values of tolerance and fairness.

And when did the Ten Commandments get so commercial? There is an amazing variety of Ten Commandments merchandise available for purchase: bumper stickers, refrigerator magnets, paperweights, t-shirts, yard signs, commemorative coins, lapel pins, backpacks, watches, baseball caps, placemats, posters, rugs, bracelets, and several very nice silk ties.

Amidst all of the merchandise and statues and controversy, I’ve heard little discussion of the actual content of the Ten Commandments. That is what we are going to do in the weeks to come. We are going to read the Ten Commandments. Try to understand their context. Explore them. Learn from them.

For most of us, this is something we have never done before. I have attended church most of my life and I cannot remember a time when I heard the Ten Commandments read or preached on. I read them in English class and I learned of them from the movies of Cecil B. DeMille and Mel Brooks. If I thought of them at all, it was as a narrow, restrictive set of rules imposed by a cranky God in order to curb the people’s immoral, lustful, violent appetites.

I wonder if the modern church isn’t just a little embarrassed by the Ten Commandments. A God who issues decrees isn’t very twenty-first century.

¹ Tom Long, *Christian Century*, March 7, 2006, p. 17.

We know that faith isn't about following rules. Sure, we should try to be good people, but there is no point in getting bogged down in details. What's important is that we have a relationship with Jesus.

And speaking of Jesus, wasn't he the consummate rule breaker—always putting the needs of people before the demands of the law? Yet in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states clearly that he does not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Jesus does not throw out the commandments. He re-interprets them in bold new ways.

I will readily admit that this series was my idea. I pushed for this focus because I think the Ten Commandments are important. They are the foundation of the ethics of Jews and Christians. They have shaped this nation in ways profound and strange. They are—quite simply—good stuff. Strong, powerful, life giving.

A case can be made that the Ten Commandments are of unique importance. After they are given, the people beg Moses from then on to serve as an intermediary; they don't want to get that close to God's holiness again. The Ten Commandments are the only part of the law given to the people straight from God. The Biblical tradition is clear. These words are of peculiar and unrivaled importance.

Then there is that wonderfully strange introduction that was our first Bible reading. The scene described is one of the most ostentatious displays of God's holiness to be found anywhere in the Bible. No still small voice, no carefully controlled burning bush. God lets God's glory rip with thunder and lightning and smoke and blasts of the trumpet. No wonder the people tremble.

That introduction serves its purpose. To visualize that strange scene, you have to use your imagination. That is good preparation for the commandments themselves. For the Ten Commandments to work, you have to use your imagination. Because they are less a list of rules than a bold act of visioning—created by God to inspire and shape a straggling band of former slaves who can only guess what it is like to live in a world shaped by God. In Egypt, the people knew only one rule, the rule of Pharaoh. With the Ten Commandments, they begin the process of imagining a world shaped by the God of liberation.

The sad thing is that we don't need our imagination to envision a world without the Ten Commandments. The people of Israel know—that is Egypt—that is slavery. In the modern era, we call it Holocaust.

A rabbi once said: at Auschwitz, all Ten Commandments were broken; whenever all Ten Commandments are broken, we get Auschwitz.²

Something is at stake here. This stuff matters. There is power in these rules, given so long ago by the God of Exodus. They are operating instructions for people who are now free. All ten are worthy of our time, attention and, God willing, our adherence.

In fact, the commandments begin with a reminder of what has already happened. These commandments are given by the God who brought the people out of slavery.

What does God require in return? Exclusive, total, uncompromising loyalty. It is interesting God makes no claim for monotheism. Our God knows there are other gods out there. In the days of the Israelites, they have names like Baal and Ashtart, Ishtar and Osiris. Today the gods we worship are known by names like fame and success, individualism and nationalism.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction*, footnote 15, chapter 3.

Can you imagine living in a community where everyone puts God first? Where God comes before career and nation, everything? Can you imagine?

The third commandment is often used as a way of discouraging children from swearing. “Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain!” The commandment has a much broader scope. It is a caution against using God and God’s name to promote a narrow human agenda.

Can you imagine being a part of a religious landscape where neither liberals nor conservatives use the name of God to advance their own purposes? Can you imagine it?

The first three commandments are all about the nature of God. They describe a holiness that cannot be contained or harnessed.

The fourth commandment is my favorite one. Thou shall take a day off once a week. Excellent! One day a week, we are to put down our work and put aside our frantic activity. Can you imagine living in a town where everyone has one day a week to rest and rediscover their true identify? Can you imagine that?

The final six commandments govern our relations with other humans—treat your elders with respect, don’t kill your neighbor, or take your neighbor’s spouse or steal your neighbor’s belongings. Our human counterparts are not objects to be used, but are full partners in covenant to be treated with dignity, respect and justice. Can you imagine that?

I can. I long to live in such a world. I want to be a part of creating such a world. But they are still commandments—not ten suggestions, not ten inspirations, they aren’t called some nice thoughts God has to help you imagine a better world.

They are commandments and, as such, isn’t there some system of reward and punishment attached to them? If you follow these ten, then good things happen? If you break them, bad things happen? Nope. None of that is in place. The Ten Commandments are simply presented. They aren’t a pass-fail test. They are God’s best ideas about what makes for a faithful and just community, what makes for faithful and joyful living. These commandments are for us, not for God. This is what it takes for us to stay on our feet. This is what it looks to belong to God and belong to one another.

The writer Annie Dillard put it this way: “God needs nothing, asks nothing, and demands nothing... It is a life with God that demands these things. ...You do not have to do these things; not at all... You do not have to do these things—unless you want to know God. They work on you, not on [God].”³

In the weeks to come, may these commandments be at work in us.

³ Annie Dillard, from “An Expedition to the Pole” in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p. 31.