The Law as Gift Peace Presbyterian Church

Exodus 20 3rd Sunday of Lent

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What joy it is to have a baptism in Lent. I wish we had a baptism to celebrate every Sunday! Whether you are one or four or fourteen or forty-four or ninety-four, if you have *never* been baptized, come talk to me. Let’s get you on the worship schedule. Let’s celebrate that God created you and has loved you from the beginning and that there’s nothing that can ever take that love away. Who else is ready to celebrate that grace? To get these wonderful promises from family, friends, congregation? Of course, God’s covenant grace is pure gift, but it does call for a faithful response and our faithful response is guided by the Ten Commandments, which Jesus summarized as Two, which I bet you remember, even if you cannot recite all Ten. The first is ….to love the Lord you God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and the second is….to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Two weeks ago we talked about the covenant promise given to Noah and family – with the rainbow sign of protection. Then God makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah. I will be your God and you will be my people. Now go from your country and kindred to the land I will show you. Trust that I will give you descendants. As I have blessed you, be a blessing to the world around you. A covenant promise is best when it is mutually lived out.

1. God rescued when the people were being oppressed as slaves in Egypt, and with Moses, God freed the people from Pharoah and sent them on a long journey to the Promised Land. Along the way, they complained, they worshipped idols, and they lost their way, but God gave them the gift of the law to help them with their life together. God directly specifies the terms of the covenant. The first three commandments are about loving God and the last six are about loving neighbor, and the fourth commandment, keeping the Sabbath is both. More about that later. But for now, let’s pray and read the scripture: *Speak to us, O God, by the voice of your Spirit. Put your law in our hearts. Write your word in our minds, and show your will in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.*

***Exodus 20:1-17 (NRSVue)*** ***– The Law as Gift***

**20**Then God spoke all these words, **2**“I am the *Lord* your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; **3**you shall have no other gods beforeme.**4**“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. **5**You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the *Lord* your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me **6**but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generationof those who love me and keep my commandments. **7**“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the *Lord* your God, for the *Lord* will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

**8**“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. **9**Six days you shall labor and do all your work. **10**But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the *Lord* your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. **11**For in six days the *Lord* made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore, the *Lord* blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. **12**“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the *Lord* your God is giving you.**13**“You shall not murder. **14**“You shall not commit adultery. **15**“You shall not steal. **16**“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. **17**“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

If you divide this passage on the Ten Commandments in half by length, you have the first half, being all about the first three commandments. Loving God. Respecting God. Honoring God. God deserves our reverence because God has saved us. If you think you are entirely self-made and have not really needed God, then you are missing the mark from the start. Being reverent to God means you do not say OMG 35 times/day. But some of you adults do that, a lot, and your teens and children do it too. It is not respectful when you are not really talking to God but using God’s name again and again that in place of just saying Wow! Also, when we use God’s name to had credence to something that is not right and just, then too we are breaking the third commandment.

And back to 2nd commandment which gets the most verbiage of all these, perhaps because it was a big problem then and now. Idols. Don’t just think we are talking about golden calves or other religions here. An idol is anything you honor or adore more than God. So that could be your travel plans, your family members, your car, your sporting events, or very easily, your money. Hear about the Study Catechism puts it: “When I treat anything other than God as though it were God, I practice idolatry. Second, when I assume that my own interests are more important than anything else, I make them into idols, and in effect make an idol of myself.”

Let’s talk about what happens when we do not put God first. I would not be quick say God punishes, but I would say that God leaves us with the consequence of our poor choices and that our poor choices affect everything – our family, our community, our church, all of it, for generations to come. Why is our country and world like it is right now? Lots of poor choices, passed down to the next generation, who then make even poorer choices. Let me see how I can soften this hard news….humm. I don’t think I can.

So let’s move on to the next section of the passage, which begins with the 4th Commandment -- Sabbath-keeping. To keep Shabbat is to stop, rest, and pay loving attention -- both to God and the people around you. That’s why some people say that this commandment is the lynchpin holding both sections together – because Sabbath keeping is crucial for relationship with God and with humanity.

As the Study Catechism of 1999 says, “God requires that a special day be set apart so that worship can be at the center of my life. It is right to honor God with thanks and praise, and to hear and receive God's Word, so that I may have it in my heart, and on my lips, and put it into practice in my life.” We need to celebrate God’s goodness with the people closest to us and to extend God’s blessing to others. Working people should not be taken advantage of by their employers. Our jobs should not be our tyrants, for life is more than work…” If we stop on the Sabbath, we acknowledge that God is running the world, not us. As boundaries between work and home life get more blurry, this is even harder to keep. That’s why getting off the computer and off the phone can sometimes provide a good opportunity to re-focus our lives on God’s goodness. When I leave here today, I will be taking the rest of Sunday and most of Monday off from working, after working long days for six straight. If you email me on a Sunday afternoon, you may not hear from me until Tuesday. This is crucial for my spiritual and emotional health… so why do I so often let work creep in on sabbath time? Why do you?

Moving on to the commandments about loving neighbor now. Commandment 5 – Honor your parents. Respect the people who made sacrifices to give you the life you have. Take care of them when they are in need. This is not a call to blind obedience, but to respect for those who guarded your life and made provisions for you, and in some cases, sacrificed a great deal to help you.

Commandment 6 – Honor life in general. God forbids anything that harms my neighbor unfairly. Murder or injury can be done not only by direct violence but also by an angry word or a nasty but clever plan, and not only by an individual but also by unjust social institutions. I should honor every human being, including my enemy, as a person made in God's image. (Study Catechism adapted)

Commandment 7 – Honor your own covenants, especially the covenant of marriage, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Now if you are married to someone who refuses to keep covenant with you, then you will end up with very little choice, except to move on as gracefully as possible. The point is – making a covenant in marriage is a serious matter, not to be taken lightly.

Commandment 8 – Honor personal property. If it belongs to you, it is yours. I had a friend when I was growing up who would borrow an item of clothing. I had to ask for it back, after weeks. Are you ever tempted to read someone text messages when they pop up on the screen? I am, but they are not mine to read. Do not take what belongs to another.

Commandment 9 – Honor the truth. Don’t bear false witness. How horrible to damage someone’s good reputation by telling lies about them, by unnecessarily saying negative things about them, when you could have keep silent. No gossip, no slander, no nasty tweets or texts. Racism, sexism, and xenophobia, fear of people different from you – are all challenged by this commandment.

Commandment 10 – Honor the circumstances of others. Stop wishing that you had what other people have. Our whole heart should belong to God alone, not to money or the things of this world. "Coveting" means desiring something wrongfully. I should not resent the good fortune or success of my neighbor or allow envy to corrupt my heart. (Study Catechism adapted)

Why should you obey these commandments? Not to win God's love, for God already loves you as much as God will ever love you. Not to earn your salvation, for Christ has earned it for you; grace is a gift, impossible to earn. Not to avoid being punished, for then you would obey out of fear, and have false motivation. No, with gladness in our hearts we should obey God's law out of gratitude, for God has blessed us by it and has given it for our well-being. When we follow these laws and see them as gifts, then our lives are better able to shine with the love of God and neighbor and we will then be a blessing to all around us, as God the Covenant maker, first intended. (The Study Catechism, re-worked)