

Living Decalogically, Pt. 1: Identity Markers
July 10, 2016
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn
Texts: Exodus 20:1-17, 1 John 5:2-3

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

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. You shall not bow down to them or worship them;

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.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. 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. 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.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

In his recent book titled “After Baptism,” John Burgess of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary recalls the week he was invited to speak to a congregation in Connecticut. One bright September morning that week, he went into his office to begin preparing both a sermon and a talk for that coming Sunday afternoon on the relevance of the Ten Commandments to modern believers.

As usual, he rode to the seminary on his bike. Once in the office, he sat down and sent his colleague an email about a routine piece of seminary business. This colleague emailed back in shock – had he not heard the news? The nation was under attack!

That morning, of course, was Sept. 11, 2001, which we all recall with our own personal stories of where we were, what we were doing on that fateful day. Over the next couple of days, John Burgess stayed in touch with the pastor of the congregation he was invited to address on that coming Sunday. Should they cancel the event? Or should they go on with life, as some small effort to reassure the congregation that the world had in fact not come to an end.

Dr. Burgess remembers giving the talk on why the Ten Commandments still matter to God’s people, with only a few minor references to the events of the week. As he greeted people after the lecture, he expected the usual polite “thank yous.”

But he recalled how - more than usual – one person after another held his handshake a little longer than normal, how they looked in his eyes a little deeper, all to say a particular thanks for his words of comfort and reassurance after a week unlike any the world had ever seen.

This morning we gather after another tragic week in the life of our nation – one almost as historic as 9/11. Two police shootings – one in Louisiana and one in Minnesota, two more instances in a long line, far, far too long a line of black men and women losing their lives at the hands of law enforcement using deadly force.

It has been a week fraught with pain and trauma. A week of African-Americans experiencing rage and anger to silent shock and everything in between. A week when many white Americans have re-doubled their resolve to bring an end to these tragedies – but, at the same time, wondered what to say without adding to the pain of those already burdened with more than anyone should have to carry.

And we come here today looking for a word from the Lord about what to do, where to begin, how to do better – because God surely expects it.

In his book, John Burgess remembers thinking to himself the week of the 9/11 attacks whether he should stick with his long, pre-selected topic of the Ten Commandments when he spoke to those believers in Connecticut. In the end, he did.

Reflecting on that experience, he writes:

“What I learned that afternoon ... was that (p)eople wanted to know whether the commandments had something to say to them in their shock and grief. They came, asking themselves, Can we trust that there is a basic moral order in the universe? Can we be

confident that our world is not falling into chaos and meaninglessness? Can we be certain that God's ways will prevail?

"People wanted to know whether the commandments could help them trust again – trust that God was in control, and that God's gracious ordering of the world would hold."

Those questions are our questions today, aren't they? Those questions have always been on the tongues of God's people who do not run from the conflict and the brokenness of the world, who look to God when all else seems unreliable.

Before this week, I had planned to preach a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments. And, like Dr. Burgess, I'm going to stick to that plan.

A few years ago there was a movie with the title, "The Year of Living Dangerously." This month I want to invite us all into a month of "living decalogically." By that, I mean living with a particular intention and focus on the Ten Commandments, which are also known as the Decalogue, which means "ten words."

I should confess that I already have a jump on you. I have taken up that practice as part of a class I am taking for my doctoral studies. This class challenges me and the other clergy in it to select a rule, or practice, for living that might deepen our faith, that might connect us with God in yet still new ways. I've chosen to focus on the Ten Commandments and how they provide a framework for being who God wants me to be – in relation to the divine and in relation to the people and the community around me. On the evening of Sunday July 24th, any who take up this invitation are invited to gather to reflect on the experience. I will share more about that later.

As for inviting you to walk with me, I fully realize that other scripture passages may seem far more relevant right now. We might turn to the forlorn lamentations of the Psalms, as I mentioned this week in my blog. We might turn to the Old Testament prophets to invoke their urgent calls for justice in society.

We might turn to any of a number of Christ Jesus' lessons that make clear God's particular preference for the poor and the marginalized. We might read any of Paul's letters for their call to us to find unity amidst our diversity, unity in Christ, practicing faith and hope and love.

So, why the Decalogue, why the Ten Commandments?

First, because in the commandments we find our way to be with God. In these uncertain and chaotic days, people of faith look for God. We yearn for God to speak, to intervene. We seek to rest in the bosom of God as a comfort and a shelter for a world that seems no longer to make sense.

The commandments are our map to God's exact whereabouts. If there had been Global Positioning Systems when Moses climbed Mt. Sinai to receive the commandments, God might have handed him a smartphone and told Moses to simply go to the God app, where a voice like Morgan Freeman's would direct the Israelites along their journey to the destination of becoming God's people.

We mere mortals, we women and men and children of every race and creed and situation have one thing in common. We are made for relationship with God. But like children we lose our way. Or like the stiff-necked Israelites, we think we know better ... until we are reminded by our own folly, our own violence, our own brokenness that we do not.

As John Burgess writes:

“Somewhere deep in our hearts we may vaguely know that we are made to worship the true God, but we turn instead to gods of our own making. We may know that we are made to care for each other, but we inevitably look out for ourselves first and neglect and even harm others.”

There we hear the thrust of the entire Decalogue, the heart of God’s law, as Christ affirmed eons after Moses. What is the greatest of all of all the laws?

“Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, strength and mind ... and your neighbor as yourself.”

So the commandments are not a check list for how to get on God’s good side. But, let’s admit, we often treat them that way. We lay down to go to sleep and reassure ourselves.

Today I didn’t kill anyone. I didn’t make a golden idol. I didn’t steal from anyone, at least not outright. I didn’t have an affair. Check. Check. Check.

“So, God,” we might say, “we good? Good.”

But to live that way is a gross simplification of what God had in mind.

We may not kill, not literally. But we can do so emotionally, we can do so with our tongues, with our words. That is a particular danger in these days when so many turn to social media for what goes today, for too many at least, as real dialogue.

But what have we done that gives life?

We may say that today we did not steal. But how can we look at our lives and ask honestly, “What do I possess that I did not rightly earn? That came at someone else’s expense?”

We may say we did not stray in our relationship with our spouse or partner. But do we live with integrity in that relationship?

We will explore questions like those in the Sundays to come. And by exploring them, we can come to a refreshed awareness of how the commandments are not a burden but a blessing, how they are identity markers for each of us, markers of how we can be with God, how we can live into the call to be God’s people in a broken and hurting world that so often seems to have lost its way, how we can in small and large ways restore our society, our state, our city as a place where all of God’s children are treated as equal and with a just equity.

Last night, we were given the gift of hosting a group of about 75 mostly African-Americans of varied ages and experiences as they gathered for an open-mike night in The Third place. One

by one, speakers were invited to the microphone to share poetry, rap, stories and reactions after this awful week in our nation.

A safe place was provided. Truth was shared. Multiple perspectives were spoken, not always agreeing but shared with mutual respect.

One Muslim sister gave us words that pierced my heart. Attendees were sharing their stories about being stopped by police. It was no coincidence that every person of color there had a story. We whites did not.

This one African-American sister was dressed beautifully in long dress and head scarf, covered head to toe in observance of her Muslim faith. But what had her husband told her to do if ever stopped by police, if she ever found herself in a situation where she had to do anything possible to make it clear she stood for peace, that she was not a threat to anyone?

“Take everything off,” her husband had told her. “Take everything off to show that you are not hiding a gun.”

What her husband was saying, in effect, was strip yourselves of all that identifies you, all that you are in the world. Deny who you are to possibly save your life.

In a week full of images we would never have wanted to see, real lives being taken, of both black citizens and of police officers in Dallas, that image hit home hardest of all for me. It spoke volumes for how we, how America, how the power in America, which is shaped by generations of white people, have stolen too much from too many people of color, right down to their identity, at least their right to be who they are without being seen as a threat.

And when I see our sisters and brothers of color get angry, I can see – at least a little more clearly – why.

Sisters and brothers, our God expects more. Our God instructs us – in the Decalogue, in the life and teachings of Christ Jesus – in how we are to care for one another. And surely God weeps when we so blatantly and sinfully dehumanize any of God’s uniquely created children.

The commandments are, in that way, a perfect instrument of God’s expectations and God’s grace. They accuse us and liberate us at once. They give us our identity. Let us be about the work of being the covenant people we are called to be. Amen.