

Exodus 20:1-17
John 2:13-22
Creekside COB
March 15, 2009

“Caring Commandments”

“All you have to do is keep the Ten Commandments.” That’s what my first boss told me. Mr. Carroll was a brusque, sort of man who acted as though he knew something about everything (which he didn’t), and never missed a chance to expound on subjects he thought would impress his customers. He was like Cliff Klaban, the know-it-all mailman in the sitcom, *Cheers*. **“Just keep the ten commandments. It’s all the religion you will need,”** Mr. Carroll said. It was ironic since he didn’t attend church, **“Too full of hypocrites,”** he said. From my teen-aged perspective, he didn’t do a particularly good job of keeping them himself. **“Just,”** made keeping the commandments sound no more difficult than keeping a lunch appointment.

The Ten Commandments used to make me anxious and afraid—the same way I felt with Junior High phys-ed teacher, Coach Deffenbaugh. He was a cross between Attila the Hun and General George Patton, only worse. We had to address him, **“Yes sir.” “No sir.”** He had a uni-brow and a scowl that could melt steel. No one transgressed his rules and lived to tell about it.

When I was a boy I pictured God as an **“eye in the sky”** watching every move and noting each transgression. The idea of God watching over me wasn’t a source of comfort. Loving God was translated, Do and don’t. Should and shouldn’t. I had no way of reconciling God’s love with God’s sovereignty, and judgment. Rather than being assured of God’s goodness and mercy following me all the days of my life, the **eye in the sky** kept me in the doghouse. I couldn’t get beyond the verse in Exodus 20 that says:

I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:5).

Being accountable for my own sin was bad enough, let alone taking the fall for my grandfather's indiscretions and passing mine on to great-grandchildren I didn't yet have.

Many of us struggle with what seems to be God's conflicting nature. Which God is he today, Jekyll or Hyde? Will God treat me tenderly or turn me to burnt toast? Before we consider the commandments, we should clear something up -- there isn't a God of the law and a God of the gospel. There isn't a "He loves me" God, and a "He's out to get me" God. The God of the Old Testament isn't a dark twin to the God of the New. Someone put it this way: "I don't believe that the Old Testament God is a God of harsh judgment who suddenly melts into a God of pure grace on page one of Matthew's gospel. Grace has been there all along..." (Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, *Peculiar Treasures*)

God is changeless. We need to get beyond the clashing concepts of God and get closer to appreciating the complementary relationship between God's care and God's commands.

The first five books of the Old Testament are called the Torah. It progresses from creation, to God's covenants with Noah and Abraham, to giving the Law to Moses. The message of a covenant was, "*This is what I promise to do for you.*" The message of the Law is, "*This is what you will do to honor me and live a life that's worth living.*" Torah means *law*. It also means, *the way*, or, a finger pointing the way. As I said last Sunday, the early Christians were called, followers of the Way-- not followers of rules but seekers of a relationship.

Jesus didn't say, "Law is so passé. Let's just get rid of all this regulatory oversight." Jesus was a Jew. Like the prophets

before him, he loved the law. “Don’t get the idea that I’ve come to abolish the Law. I’ve come to fulfill it.” Jesus must have known these Psalms by heart:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked... but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. (Psalm 1:1)

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord... You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes. (Psalm 119:1, 4)

The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. (Psalm 119:72)

Before Elkhart made the network news with the highest unemployment rate in the country, our fair city received national press for taking the Ten Commandments to court. At issue was the removal of a monument with God’s top ten on it that was located outside the City-County building. It set off a big debate about the separation of church and state, and whether it was an example of government promoting religion, or whether it was just a social code of ethics upon which a responsible, moral society is based.

During the height of the debate, a reporter from the Cincinnati Enquirer called me to ask my view of the issue. I said I found it interesting that there was no protest from the Jewish community about removing the commandments, at least none that I was aware of. The Jews had them much longer than Christians. Apparently they weren’t bothered by removal of the monument. Maybe it has something to do with cherishing the commandments in their hearts and minds and actions. God doesn’t need “Keep the Ten Commandments” signs on our lawns and bumper stickers. Like the Psalms say, God gave the commandments to delight in, meditate upon, and live out.

***Living* the Ten Commandments trumps *displaying* them. Don't worship other gods. Don't make stupid idols. Don't misuse my name. Keep the Sabbath holy and rest. Honor your parents. Don't kill. Don't sleep with anyone's spouse but your own. Don't steal, lie, and don't covet. You can't get more straightforward than that. The threat to the commandments is not from atheist and agnostics, but the likes of you and me who forget them.**

Years ago, the TV journalist Ted Koppel, gave "much talked about" commencement address at Duke University. He said: "TV is making its mark on the American psyche. We have actually convinced ourselves that slogans will save us. "Shoot up if you must; but use a clean needle." "Enjoy sex whenever with whomever you wish; but wear a condom."

No. The answer is no. Not no because it isn't cool or smart or because you might end up in prison or dying from AIDS -- but no, because it's wrong. Because we have spent 5,000 years as a race of rational human being trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes. In the place of Truth we have discovered facts; for moral absolutes we have substituted moral ambiguity.

Our society finds truth too strong a medicine to digest undiluted. In its purest form Truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder; it is a hallowing reproach. What Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions, they are Commandments. Are, not were.

The sheer brilliance of the Ten Commandments is that they codify, in a handful of words, acceptable human behavior. Not just for then or now but for all time. Language evolves, power shifts from nation to nation, messages are transmitted with the speed of light, man erases one frontier after another; and yet we and our behavior, and the Commandments which govern that behavior, remain the same. The tension between those Commandments and our baser instincts provide the grist for journalism's daily mill. What a huge, gaping void there would be in our informational flow and in our entertainment without

routine violation of the Sixth Commandment. Thou shalt not murder.”

Is there anything in the daily news cycle that doesn't involve God's law? My grandmother often said, “*The chickens have come home to roost.*” Some very big chickens have come back, or, as Ted Koppel said, “*Our society is being given the strong, undiluted medicine of truth.*” How could our economy have collapsed so quickly? Its because we took easy choices over hard ones. Buying on credit was a breeze. Enjoy now. Pay later. Loan officers handed mortgages out like candy to people they knew couldn't afford it. The premadonas on Wall Street found all sorts of ways to leverage their earning while regulators who were supposed to be looking for such things looked the other way. That's how Bernie Madoff swindled \$50 billion entrusted to him by individuals and institutions that are now left with nothing.

God's commandments have everything to do with the current economic crisis. Worshipping the money idol, greed, lying, stealing, coveting -- pieces of broken commandments are all over the floor. But let's not bash and blame the bankers and business folks. We are in it all together. The world was selling and we were buying like everyone else.

We cannot overstate it. GOD is love. God IS love. God is LOVE, and because of love God has established limits. Judgment is an aspect of God's love. Love won't let us do as we please. Imagine parents telling their son or daughter, “Before you go out, remember, we love you very much. Don't be concerned about curfew. Just go out with your friends and do whatever you want to do. Whatever it is, we don't mind.” God loves us enough to set limits and show us what happens when we spend and consume with no regard for the impact.

There is an unchanging truth that runs through God's covenants, a 5,000 year-old code of behavior, the witness of the prophets, and ultimately to Jesus. God says, “Here's your life. You have the freedom to do with it what you will. There is a way it will work, and there's a way it won't. You can try to make up

your own code for the road, but it won't work. Create your own god if you want, but if you choose my design for life, you will see your golden calf or golden parachute for what they are, nothing but dumb idols."

God's love for us isn't based upon how well we keep his commandments. Moses killed an Egyptian but it didn't disqualify him from carrying a stone tablet that said, "Thou shalt not kill." Broken, disobedient and rebellious as we are, God has given caring commandments to preserve our lives and draw us into God's heart.

If you will stay with me just a bit more, I'd like to leave you with God's commandments in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor:

One. You shall have no other gods before me. In the first place because I am very jealous of your affections and in the second place because other gods can't do anything for you.

Two. No more golden calves. You look silly bowing down to little statues you've made. You don't need them. You have me.

Three. Don't throw my name around. The fact that you know mine at all is a sign of our closeness. Don't abuse the privilege.

Four. Keep the Sabbath, not for my sake but for yours. One day a week stop working and remember that you are more than what you do.

Five. Honor your father and mother. Whatever job they did on you, they are still your roots.

Six. Don't murder. However dubious it may seem, all life is precious to me, including yours. Until you can make it, don't take it.

Seven. Don't mess around with marriage vows, your own or anyone else's. Sticking with one person is the best chance you have got of growing up.

Eight. Don't take what doesn't belong to you. Life may not be fair, but that doesn't mean you can't be.

Nine. Don't give your word on things you know aren't true. Your word is as much a part of you as your arm or leg. Twist it and you will limp.

Ten. Don't fondle other people's things in your mind as if they were your own. You'll not only resent them for having things; you'll soon resent yourself for not having them too. Learn to want what you have and pretty soon you'll have what you want. (*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 47-48)