

March 7, 2021—3 Lent

## **Sermon--Exodus 20**

**The Rev. Mel Schlachter**

**On the lawn around on the back side of the Miami County Courthouse in Troy, Ohio—where we last lived and served—stands a large stone maybe four or five feet high with the Ten Commandments all incised to the granite. I'm sure it is still there. In 2006 the Supreme Court ruled that such a stone was permissible if it did not have a lot of other religious bells and whistles, or if it was not inside the courthouse itself. The decision was 5-4. They fudged: "Well, it depends."**

**Proponents of these megaliths talk about them as a part of the history of law giving, the Torah after all, so very appropriate. It's the source of a tired old joke. This rabbi and his friend a Lutheran minister have been enjoying lunch together. They stand up to go their separate ways and the pastor says to his rabbi buddy, "Well, so long and keep the faith." To which the rabbi replies, "Yes, and you keep the commandments."**

**The word "commandments" was applied in the Christian tradition more than the Jewish. Jewish leaders often call them the "ten teachings" and see them quite a bit less as a framework of morality or law, and quite a bit more as**

themes shaping a community. (We shall get to that in a bit.)

When did you first encounter the ten whatevers? For me the first time I went head-to-head with the Ten Commandments was age 12 in confirmation class. There, preparing to make an adult decision about our commitment to Christ, we memorized several creeds of the Church including this one. I don't remember any discussion, or at least any memorable discussion. And I didn't do much else with them aside from Lenten readings or litanies until seminary.

I do recall a number of people in public places or churches saying that if only people kept the commandments we would have a better world. I thought they were smoking dope. I didn't see it, then.

The commandments do not work well as commandments, as law or rules. For one thing all but one are framed negatively: "Thou shall not...." The legal message would be "Avoid these things and do anything you want." That won't fly.

For another, we have this pseudo-Christian voice in our head going "For Jews it is the law, for Jesus it is grace." We have contrived to set up a straw man in order to discount or disown our Jewish heritage. It's lots more complex than that. For now, disregard that polarity.

**Ironically, Christians do the legal thing with this passage whereas Jewish commentators hardly at all.**

**As St. Augustine and others have recognized, the Ten are given by God out of incredible love for God's covenant people—for the people of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus. "Yet," as noted Episcopal teacher Barbara Brown Taylor put it, "these practices are not kindly suggestions. They express the purposeful will of God for God's people. Those who ignore the divine teachings do so at their own peril."**

**So on to the Ten Teachings. My goal is to help the Ten Teachings to a new relevance for our community life especially, but also for our individual behavior.**

**Think of this passage rather like the statement of purpose in a wedding ceremony. It sets forth the hoped for conditions for a thriving household within a household of great love and caring; and so here with a community.**

**Teaching #1, Love the Lord your God, as Professor Emeritus Sibley Towner points out, does not deny the existence of other gods. Oh yes, don't we know they clamor for our allegiance with all the perseverance of robo callers. Never enough money, greed. Subtly or grossly controlling others to do our bidding, pride. Allowing ourselves to be dominated by others' wishes or opinions or politics, without claiming ourselves.**

**Patriotism on steroids. On and on. Loyalty to all these gods and others too will sabotage the building of a loving, caring community. Our allegiance needs to be to God alone.**

**Teaching #2. Graven images.. God is jealous of any representation An early human instinct is for control. Never mind other gods, we are not to make representations of YHWH because to do so is to put “God in a box.” Does YHWH look like your great grandfather and a long white beard? Is He white? Is He a he? All these spring from a perfectly human effort to control the uncontrollable. To remove mystery.**

**The third century Alexandrian theologian Origen has this wonderful mystical interpretation of the jealous God: “Now Christ is especially jealous for the house of God in each of us, not wishing it to be a house of merchandise, or that the house of prayer become a den of thieves.” The house of God in you. Wow.**

**Teaching #3. Not make wrongful use of the Name. According to Professor Towner, this one is not about cursing God when you hit your thumb with a hammer. Rather, ancient Israel just like most everyone else had oaths and invocations to harness divine power for human interests by magic or some other means. This is always a temptation for us, too. If we pray just right God has to act to heal our friend. If the healing does not happen, then**

**we must not have prayed correctly or fervently enough. It's about us, and we expect God to act in certain ways if we get it right. That "always comes under the scrutiny of this commandment."**

**Teaching #4. I forget who first realized that what set apart Hebrew religion the most from its surrounding religions is the observance of the sabbath, Shabbot. Not a day of worship, the command is to rest. This is the second longest of the teachings because it makes sure we stay on the hook—no, you can't make your ox work, you can't make a quick run to HyVee, hire the immigrant for your landscape work tomorrow. The Hebrews even had God taking a day off in their creation story—it is the way the world functions properly. Treating every day as a potential work day is not a modern phenomenon. It is what the ancient Hebrews were trying to stop because it is unhealthy for person, for family, for community. Take heed. I have heard rabbis say that the sabbath is the ideal time for husband and wife to make love. Take note!**

**Teaching #5 through #10. These all "regulate relationships" among the community of the elect. For Number 5, Honor father and mother, don't go first to your own growing up but to a) the egalitarian relationship expressed here between mother and**

**father—a step forward in ancient times; and b) the importance of carrying on tradition over the generations.**

**“Thou shalt not murder” does not end either warfare or capital punishment, but homicide within the community, revenge killings and the like. Of course killing your wife then yourself. St. Augustine says that this command enjoins self-destruction. Later on Jesus would redefine this teaching.**

**Adultery, stealing and lying. Not only do they put relationships in turmoil, they also complicate property concerns. What are the property claims of children born in an adulterous relationship? Moreover, it is inspiring to learn that kings overstepping their powers of eminent domain are breaking the standard on stealing. The ninth commandment against bearing false witness is especially meant to protect the justice system and thus the most vulnerable in the society from perjury.**

**St. Augustine weighs in again on this cluster of commands or teachings: “all of these imperatives are rightly obeyed only when they are measured by the standard of our love of God and our love of our neighbor in God.” In other words, unless you are aware of the overwhelming love of God behind all these standards, you are missing what makes them special to the covenant community. To make them legalistic violates the third commandment by turning God into a judge.**

**Ah #10 Thou shall not covet....We kids always liked to add, ...thy neighbor's.....donkey. The text then gives a long list of things we might develop an inordinate desire or lust for, things or people we just can't get out of our mind. Go ahead, make your own list. I can still remember the night in the fall of 1977, very late, and I am down in a school cellar where I was making wine. Holding a muslin bag that I would fill with red grapes and squeeze out the juice with my now bloody looking hands and fill again. After a while asking myself why I am doing this. Came the answer: I am having an affair with the grapes.**

**The tenth teaching nails you somewhere. Where does it hit you?This tells us we are in trouble unless we come to terms with what we obsess about, at the very least far too distracted by our coveting, at worst heading for a crash and burn.**

**So has this helped you come back into the Ten Teachings? Did your pulse speed up as we focused on one or another, then you might use one or more as Lenten meditation objects. Usually there is at least one of these that wants to interact with us, to tell us something. If you are not sure, then go for #4 and pay attention to your sabbath. That's a sure bet to re-order your life so the love of God has room.**