

Third Sunday in Lent – March 15, 2009
The Rev. John A. Buerk

THE COMMANDMENTS AND ETHICS

Our first lesson this morning is a listing of the Ten Commandments. The Commandments have been much in the news in recent years with challenges being made as to where they can be exhibited. Some people are in favor of them being exhibited wherever and whenever possible. Others claim that to exhibit them publicly is to violate the first amendment of the Constitution which forbids the establishment of any religion. Feelings run high on both sides.

There is one problem with the Ten Commandments – actually two problems. One is that with all the intense interest in their being exhibited; virtually no one can name them all.

The other problem is that people often don't know what they mean.

And there is actually another problem and that is how do you number them? In the Hebrew tradition – and since they got them first it seems as though they should carry the day – the first Commandment is, **The Lord Your God is one.** The second is, **You shall have no other God's besides me.**

However, The Western Catholic Church combined these first two Commandments and since they still had to come up with ten they split the last one. The Lutherans kept the Roman tradition, but the other Protestants and Eastern Orthodox use the Hebrew numbering.

Overall this numbering of the Commandments doesn't make too much difference unless you are making a bad joke about adultery and you make reference to the sixth commandment – and there goes the joke. It's a joke I never tell because you might have some Presbyterians listening and they wouldn't get it.

We will say a bit more about the arrangement of the Commandments later on. But now, let's look at what the Commandments mean and their implications.

The first Commandment says, **You shall have no other god's before me.** Now if you think about that phrasing you realize that it does not say there are no other gods. It seems to recognize that other gods exist, but they are not to be worshiped. And, you are not to make any graven images of them. The implication is that there are many forces out there that command your attention, but they really don't measure up to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Paul Tillich suggested that God might be identified as the “ground of our being”. That always sounded good to me, but I'm not sure I understand it.

The next Commandment tells us that we are not to take God's name in vain. It is usually assumed that this means we shouldn't swear – at least we shouldn't swear using references to the deity. But, some of the best scholars admit that this Commandment is a puzzle. They concur that it was not making reference to what we mean by swearing. They suggest it meant that when you went to God to ask for something you didn't go empty-handed. You should not go to God in vain – you should bring an appropriate sacrifice.

Or it might mean that when agreeing to a contract in God's name, you couldn't break the contract without incurring the wrath of God.

It is also worth noting, however, what the function of swearing is in our culture. It means that you are calling on some force to afflict another person. If you ask God to damn someone, you are making a pretty serious proposal.

But, lately, you hear few swear words that involve the godhead. You hear a lot of swear words related to sexuality. You can speculate that sex has risen as a phenomenon of force – even to the point of superseding religion.

But – the bottom line is, “DON'T SWEAR!”

The next Commandment is the only one that is not stated in the negative – all the others say “don't” do something. But the one about honoring your father and your mother so that you may live a long life is stated in the positive. And honoring your parents is a way of sustaining the community and the culture. And that is important. To underscore the point, just remember the great musical, **FIDDLER ON THE ROOF**, and the song “**TRADITION**”? And of course the reverse is also true, parents should respect their children and that means taking care of them – as President Obama has appropriately emphasized.

The rest of the Commandments have to do with our relationship to others and what has to be done to make society work. This section of the Commandments begins with, **You shall not murder**. And, please note, it is not, **You shall not kill**. The Hebrew language has a word for kill, and it has one for murder, and the commandment uses the word for murder. If you read the Old Testament you will be painfully aware that there is a lot of killing that goes on – much of it in the name of God.

You shall not commit adultery, is the next Commandment, and again, it originally did not mean what we mean by adultery. It did mean that a woman belonged to her husband and no one else. And she could not have sex with any one else.

It did not mean that a man could not be intimate with women other than his wife. Biblically, a man could have several wives and he could have concubines and there was even some slack allowed for other relationships.

This Commandment meant that a man could not be intimate with someone else's wife. If a man was caught with another man's wife both he and she were stoned. You could make a case for this being a form of abortion because a man's estate went to his son, and if a wife was unfaithful and got pregnant as a result, it might mean that the man's heir would not actually be his son.

On the other hand, if a man was caught being intimate with another man's concubine, she was beaten and he was fined. If the concubine got pregnant it was another helping hand for the household.

Women were owned by men – and their role was subservient to the male.

You shall not steal comes next. There is an interesting take on this commandment in the popular book, **THE KITE RUNNER**. The young boy who is the main character in the story is told by his father that there is only one sin - the sin of stealing. **When you kill a man, you steal a life – you steal his wife's right to a husband, rob his children of a father. When you tell a lie, you steal someone's right to the truth. When you cheat, you steal the right to fairness. (p. 18)**

And stealing is measured differently in different situations with different results. When you live in a poor society, stealing can have terrible consequences and the penalty is, consequently, severe. In the Middle East, a person caught stealing would have his hand cut off.

But, in our affluent society you can steal a car and not go to jail. And, if you are like me, you have probably had a car or two that you prayed someone would steal!

In our current financial disaster, people are outraged that so much money can be stolen – and those who steal it walk away. And this goes all the way from the four billion dollars that literally disappeared in Iraq, to CEO's getting golden parachutes.

Not bearing false witness speaks for itself – and misrepresenting mortgage obligations seems to fall into this category.

When we come to the last two Commandments according to the Roman and Lutheran version of dividing them, the ninth Commandment is, **You shall not covet your neighbor's house.**

The tenth Commandment is, **You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his oxen or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.**

Now this commandment seems to fly in the face of the advertising industry because it does. Much of our culture seems to be based on the premise of wanting what our neighbor has.

But there is an interesting twist in the ninth and tenth Commandments. The Commandments are listed in two places in the Bible – in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5. In the first listing, in Exodus – not coveting your neighbor’s house comes first – in the ninth Commandment, and not coveting your neighbor’s wife comes later in the tenth Commandment. In the Deuteronomy listing they switch the house and the wife so the wife comes first. Apparently the editor of Deuteronomy got a better wife.

So there you have it – the Ten Commandments. The Commandments are not necessarily what they seem to be, but they have been able to create a lot of fuss.

I would like to make two observations. One, to make such a big deal of having them carved in stone and put in front of a court building looks to me a little like making them into a graven image which the first commandment says we shouldn’t do.

The other observation is that I don’t think putting the Commandments on display makes people behave any differently at all – which, I assume, is their purpose

So we have the Ten Commandments, but don’t forget that Jesus said there were two more. Jesus said, **The greatest commandment is you should love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.**

And then he added, **on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matt. 22:36-40)**