

**Feb. 7, 2021
Christ the Servant, Reston
Lent 3
Exodus 20:1-17**

Some sermons go over people's heads. Some sermons hit them in their hearts. I am aiming to preach this sermon over your shoulders. By that I mean that I have a target audience for this sermon. I have been pleased this year to teach a confirmation class with four very bright and energetic young people looking out at me over Zoom every couple of weeks. We are sticking to Luther's Small Catechism and we are just finishing a unit on the Ten Commandments. As a matter of fact, the class is having their final exam today on the Ten Commandments. And, as fate and the Revised Common Lectionary would have it, our Old Testament reading today is the Ten Commandments. As Church Lady would say, "How conveeeenient!"

This sermon gives me a chance to wrap things up with them by way of letting you listen in. We have been studying each and every one of the ten. We have learned hand symbols to help us remember which one is which – at least in the weird way Lutherans number them. But we haven't had a chance to pull back and take a look at why they are in our Bible in the first place. What is the purpose of these ten?

The 10 Commandments don't get preached on much anymore. People have assumed they have gone the way of 15-cent hamburgers, hula-hoops, and the milkman. Either that, or the attitude is, "I'm a Lutheran. I'm saved by grace, not by rules." Or maybe the image of God as an angry male micromanaging folks' lives turns people away.

Well, maybe we need to take a fresh look at this list of “The Top Ten.” (There are actually 617 commandments in the Old Testament you may remember.) There are two ways to look at this list which will get us away from that image of the old-man-in-the-sky threatening you with the fires of hell if you break the law. The first way is to see the list as a continuation of God’s plan of salvation. Before God met Moses on Mt. Sinai, God had already seen the suffering of his people, revealed God’s self to Moses. God had led the people across the Red Sea into freedom, and provided food and water in the wilderness. Now that God has given his community safety, God is describing for them how people in a community get along with one another. They don’t murder each other. They don’t steal. They don’t tell lies. They don’t go to bed with the spouse of another. They are content with what they have. God is helping them get along.

The other way to look at the 10 Commandments is through the lens of the New Testament. Here’s where Luther’s Small Catechism comes in handy for those of you who may still have one in an old chest in the attic. Luther says that Christians should go beyond the “don’ts” of the Ten Commandments and add “do’s.” For instance, of course we should not steal. But Luther says we should carry that step one further and “help our neighbors to improve and protect their property and income.”

So, I put a series of situational ethics questions to my confirmation students and asked them to think about the way Luther would have thought about them. “Sam goes to his neighbor’s house when they’re on vacation. He breaks in and takes their large screen TV home with him.” Is that a violation of the seventh commandment?” They all agreed that it was. No brainer. Then I put this question to them: “Tracy asks Sue to watch her purse. Sue gets distracted and wanders away. Tracy comes back to find her purse gone.” Is it a violation of the seventh commandment about stealing? “No,”

they said. “Tracy didn’t take it.” But Luther says Christians should go one step further and help our neighbors protect their property. It got them thinking about the New Testament way to look at the Ten Commandments.

It really got interesting when we got to the sixth commandment, “You shall not commit adultery.” Again, we studied Luther’s explanation: “We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.” So then we looked at the situations: “Ted has been married to Connie for ten years. Ted is getting tired of the marriage. So, he’s having a secret affair with his secretary.” They all agreed that it was a violation of the sixth commandment.

Then we tried this one: “Ted is at a party. When his wife, Connie, isn’t around he bad-mouths her to others.” Is it a violation of “You shall not commit adultery?” The class couldn’t see how this could be, since neither Ted nor Connie had actually slept with anyone else. But then we took a look at the New Testament way of interpreting it – the part where Luther says we should “love and honor our spouse.” Is Ted’s behavior honoring and loving Connie? No.

We had fun with this. We talked about situations having to do with murder and bearing false witness (lying.) The point is that, when we look at the commandments as a how-to list for living together in community, and when we look at them as reminders of the helpful things we should be doing for other members of our community, the list takes on a whole new and fresh meaning.

So, there were two things I wanted to get across to my confirmation class before we wind up this unit on the Ten Commandments. The first was that the commandments are part of God’s plan of salvation. The second was that they are a how-to manual for living together with family, friends, and the

other brothers and sisters God has put us here on earth with. But no sermon would be complete without a third point, especially one which is so utterly “Lutheran.” And that is this:

None of us fully lives out God’s plan of salvation. None of us follows the how-to-manual perfectly for living in community with other people. We all fall short. St. Paul has said it best; “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

That’s the main thing I would like for you, as a confirmation class, to remember for your final exam. Remember it until the day of your confirmation. Remember it until the day you die. For the day that you die, your Lord and Savior will welcome you with open arms. Even if you have not lived up to one of these ten.

Remember that God loves you always. Remember that Christ died for you. Remember that, at your baptism, you have been given forgiveness of sin, deliverance from the dark side of the world, and eternal life. And ... because you have been given these great gifts you can reach out to others, forgiving them, keeping them away from evil, and giving them new life each and every day. You can do it. God has given you an instruction manual for it!