Book 8 Sunday May 20, 1979

"THE FIRST COMMANDMENT" Exodus 20:2-3, John 1:1-5, 14-18

One evening at a social gathering, a woman whose children were not the best behaved in town, decided to give me her opinion on the failure of the church and the schools to give proper moral instruction to the younger generation. Among other things, she suggested very strongly that if all young people had to memorize the Ten Commandments, the world would be in much better shape.

Perhaps the woman had a point, although there is often a wide gap between knowing what's right and doing what's right. So I asked the woman, "Do you know the Ten Commandments?" "Of course," she answered, somewhat angered that I had dared to ask. "Name them," I responded. She cleared her throat, mumbled a few words and in embarrassment could only think of two of the ten--"You shall not kill, and you shall not commit adultery." Our brief conversation came to an end and so did her good opinion of me if she ever had one in the first place.

Like that woman, most of us have heard of the Ten Commandments and most of us believe that they are some very basic and solid rules to live by, but I also suspect that most of us would be hard pressed to name them if asked. Here's your chance to remedy that situation. In this sermon series on the Ten Commandments which began last Sunday, we are going to be looking carefully at the Ten Commandments and how they guide us in our living as Christians.

Last week we began the series by considering the 5th Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." Today we're going to begin at the beginning and examine the first commandment. As we study the Ten Commandments in this sermon series, we will always be doing so on two levels: first, we will try to get underneath the words to the eternal truth they embody, and second, we will explore the meaning of each commandment as it applies to our life in today's world.

Before we look more specifically at the first commandment, we need some understanding of how these Ten Commandments came to hold such a central position for the Jews and for us as Christians.

Many of you have seen the movie entitled, "THE TEN COMMANDMENTS." One of the most misleading scenes in that movie is the one in which God is pictured as a kind of divine drill or magic buzz saw. Moses, played by Charleton Heston, is pictured as holding two tablets of stone up and the fiery finger of God attacks them, writing out the Ten Commandments in perfect Hebrew. That's a sensational scene for a movie, but it is not the way ethical systems are born, nor is it the way the Ten Commandments came into being. The Ten Commandments did not drop from heaven fully written.

The Ten Commandments and the Old Testament which contains them, came out of the living, moving, worshiping life of the Hebrew people and their relationship to the living God. All societies need rules and ethical standards. The Hebrews found that these commandments were basic and helped them live together in an orderly fashion. The commandments helped protect them from each other and also helped to build into their society a dignity, a personal integrity and a sense of God's presence. The Hebrews knew these commandments were from God because when people lived according to them, the whole society benefited. After all God wants his people to live together in peace and harmony.

Now let's look at the first commandment in some detail. It's placed first for good reason, listen; "I am the Lord your God who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, you shall have no other gods before me."

The opening part of this commandment is simply a statement of God's existence. It states plainly, "I am the only God that exists, there is no other god. Thus the opening statement is nothing less than a command to acknowledge the reality of God's total claim upon our lives. Underneath the words is the implication that God is not an impersonal power; God is not an "it". Neither is God to be identified with nature, reason, fate, or any other philosophical or abstract concept. God is the source of all life, the source of all consciousness, the source of personality, the source of moral purpose, the source of ethical action.

At the same time, God transcends time, transcends space, and no matter where one goes, one cannot escape God.

Thus the Psalmist wrote: "If I go to heaven you are there; If I go into hell, you are also there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there you shall find me." The Psalmist also wrote, "The fool says in his heart, there is no God." Many of the Psalms are a kind of commentary on the first part of the first commandment. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein."

God is in the heights and depths of life. God is actively working in the world. Thus the first commandment does not say, "I am the God in nature." That would be too abstract, too distant. Rather the commandment states: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." It is saying, "I am the God who acts in history. I act to free slaves, to bring justice. I act to give life. I help the lowly, the downtrodden, the powerless." "I help those who cannot help themselves."

Thus in the Old Testament, obedience is not a duty, obedience is a response in gratitude to the infinite love of God. The Hebrew people are not called to keep the commandments in order to win God's love. They are called to keep the commandments because God has already and continues to love them. Keeping the commandments is an act of thanksgiving because they desire to respond to this infinite loving, graceful God.

So the first part of this first commandment is simply a commandment to be aware of God's existence, to acknowledge God's sovereignty and to admit God's total claim on all of life. It's saying that God's loving concern and desire for our well-being is always and everywhere present.

2. The second part of the first commandment is also a straight-forward statement. "YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME!" This part of the commandment is not given much attention today and yet it is probably the commandment that is broken most regularly by most of us. "You shall have no other gods before me."

Paul Tillich, one of the most perceptive theologians of the 20th century, often defined a person's god as a

person's ultimate concern. Your god is that reality which elicits from you your deepest feelings and your utmost loyalty. Thus your god may be your job, your family, success, or whatever attracts your strongest devotion. With this definition of god, there are no atheists for every life, every human being has an ultimate concern. Every life has a god. The question is not, "is there a god for you?" but, "What kind of god does your life serve?" What is the nature of your ultimate concern? Does it give you slavery or freedom? Does it lead to life or to death? Does it open you to all that life has, or does it diminish you?

There are plenty of gods around to worship. Thus the commandment states, "YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME." Ask yourself these questions and answer them honestly in your own mind and you will know what gods you worship. "Where is your first loyalty?" What is the ultimate value your life is organized to serve? Where does your security rest? Where can you be most deeply threatened? What does your money finally support?

On an even deeper level, consider these questions: Does your life serve a unified whole? Or are you split up in divergent, competitive values, serving all sorts of conflicting goals? If God is one, then there must be a unity that comes to our lives by the worship of that oneness. If God is one, then our lives must reflect one standard, one value, one truth, and one love that is ultimate. That finally will result in one human family, not a family in which everybody looks alike, or understands the truth in the same way, but one family all drawn into unity by the worship of the one God.

If there is one God, then there cannot be one law that applies to people we like and another law that applies to people we don't like. That's why Jesus said, "Love your enemies." There cannot be one value by which we relate to our families and another value by which we relate to strangers.

This first commandment is perhaps the most controversial of them all. If the God of life is seen in every human being in creation, then we must treat every human being in God's creation as sacred and holy, and there can be no categorical denial of another's sacred humanity.

This has some strong practical implications. If God is one there can be no slavery. If God is one there can be no segregation. If God is one there can be no prejudice or bigotry, for every act of discrimination or injustice whether it be economic, political or social, reveals that we worship other gods before we worship the one God.

If the God of life is seen in every human being, there can be no distinction between those who fight on our side in a conflict and those who fight against us. When we de-personalize people to the point of rejoicing in their deaths, we are violating the oneness of God.

To preserve our own humanity in the face of our attitude toward people who in warfare we call our enemies or who in our society we don't like, we try to act as if they are less than human. Sometimes we call them "animals." Or in war we convince ourselves that those are not human beings we are killings; we convince ourselves that they are not brothers, fathers or sons; no they are Krauts, Japs, Chinks, dirty communists or something else less than human. By reducing our enemies to something less than human it is easier for us to hate them or kill them, and we think the oneness of God is not violated. Gooks, Kooks, beatniks, hippies, all of these terms and more depersonalize human beings and violate the first commandment.

If God is one as in the first commandment, then every war in human history is a civil war, for it is a war inside the family of God's people.

When we forget the oneness of God, then war does strange things to us. For example, when an administration in Washington D.C. makes a mistake in domestic policy, criticism is free. Critics bring pressure upon that administration to change that policy; that is considered legitimate political activity. Yet when an administration makes a mistake in foreign policy and embroils us in a war, suddenly those critics are called traitors; their patriotism is questioned. The point is that the branding of some as traitors is done in the name of another false god--the god of nationalism that we worship instead of the one true God. "You shall have no other gods before me."

When the flag of nationalism or any other "ism" flies

above the altar of God, we have broken the first commandment. On the other hand, the worship of the one true God calls us out of that narrow boundary by which we too often define the worth of human life. It calls us into a deeper understanding of the common humanity that unites us all.

"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, you shall have no other gods before me." Amen.