Sunday, July 1, 1979
THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT
Exodus 20:14; John 8:1-11

In this sermon series on the ten commandments, we have noted several times that the first four commandments deal with our relationship to God — (1) You shall worship God and God alone, (2) You shall not make any images of God, (3) You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. (4) Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy — take time for the worship of God.

The remaining six commandments all have to do with interpersonal relationships, with how we treat other people. Thus, the remaining six cover the full range of human emotions and relationships. (5) Honor your father and your mother, and (6) You shall not kill, are the first two of the remaining six commandments.

Commandment number seven, "You shall not commit adultery has to do with our sexuality, with sexual ethics and sexual practices. It has as its background the Judeo-Christian view of the sacredness of human bodies, the sacredness of human relationships and the sacredness of personhood. It has to do with the covenants and promises we make to each other.

To properly understand the 7th commandment and what it means for us today, we are going to look first at its original context and meaning and then we'll see how Jesus Christ gave it new meaning and how it guides us in our sexual behavior in our own time.

When this 7th commandment first came into practice, the Hebrew people in the Old Testament followed the custom of polygamy, not monogamy. A man would often have more than one wife. Also, when this commandment was first received, it was in the context of a patriarchal society, so that even with this commandment in force, the early Hebrews did not regard sexual relations between a married man and an unmarried woman as breaking this commandment. There was a double standard, one for men and another for women.

In the early Hebrew patriarchal culture, for example, a man committed adultery only if he took another man's wife; that is, for a man adultery was an offense against another's marriage rather than against one's own. A married woman, on the other hand, committed adultery if she was unfaithful with any man, married or not. Thus, if a married man avoided married woman, he could have as many affairs as he wished and still not violate Commandment number seven.

A major reason behind this kind of double standard in a patriarchal society was that women were considered property. Indeed, one can still find in the Old Testament law that the seduction of a man's unbetrothed daughter was regarded simply as an offense against his property, not a violation of the 7th commandment. However, if a man seduced another man's wife, then he had not only damaged that husband's property but had caused a break in the marriage covenant as well.

So, the 7th commandment in its original context covered a rather narrow scope adultery was defined as sex by a married man with someone else's wife or sex by a married woman with anyone other than her husband. Within this narrow definition, adultery was a serious offense, and the guilty party could be sentenced to death.

At the same time, however, we need to be reminded that with the Hebrews there was no negative repressive attitude toward sex. The Hebrews were lusty-life-affirming people. If you don't believe it read the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament.

The Christian view and understanding of the 7th commandment has its roots in the Hebrew understanding, but with some important changes. We will note some of these changes in a moment, but first we are going to look at some of the underlying Christian assumptions concerning sex and the 7th commandment and then we'll look more specifically at what the 7th commandment has to say to us in our time.

1. First along with the Hebrew understanding of God and creation, we Christians affirm that human sexuality is good. It is to be celebrated. It is a gift from God. Our sexuality is an important part of being human and is part of what God purposes for us. It is built into life by our Creator and is part of the human yearning for union.

This means there is more to sex than biology. Human beings are more than animals. There is more to sex than procreation. Sex is more than satisfying a physical drive. Sex is a function of the total person. Thus, to see another person as a sex object only, or to treat another person as a sex object only, is an adulteration of the true meaning and understanding of sex. That's why Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

The Christian then understands sex to be one of God's gifts to human beings and it is to be received and used with thanksgiving and without using or abusing another person. At the same time there is nothing in the Christian understanding of sex which regards sex as nasty or impure.

Thus, for the Christian, what the 7th commandment is saying is that the expression of this good gift of sex is to take place inside a relationship of love and commitment through which it can communicate the holiness of life as well as the gratification of biological desire. Sexuality involves both body and spirit. They cannot be separated. It involves friendship, caring, companionship, the joy of being in each other's presence and more. It is a relationship of equals. Neither person is the property of the other.

There is no room in the sexual relationship for the double standard. That's why Jesus stopped the men from stoning the woman caught in adultery as reported in the Gospel of John. He wasn't condoning adultery, but he was reminding the men present of their own guilt. "Let him who is without sin be the first to throw a stone." Jesus Christ took the Hebrew understanding of the 7th commandment an important step further. Men and women are equal. Adultery is the breaking of the covenant of marriage by husband or wife — no matter who the other person is. Adultery is seeing sex as something less than it is. Adultery is the kind of lusting that sees another person as a sex object only which denies their personhood. Adultery is the misuse of sex.

Thus, Jesus Christ knew that because sex is such a power within us and because it involves the total person it can easily be misused. Actually, the folk wisdom which has been handed down through the centuries has always known that there are wars in which human sexuality may be most satisfactorily and properly expressed and ways which are less satisfactory and harmful to human beings. The "rules" as we may call them have varied from place to place and

from age to age, but “rules” of some sort there have always been even when they have not been much followed.

To put it another way, societies and communities of human beings have always discovered that sexual behavior in an entirely unrestricted fashion is hardly conducive to the best interests of men and women if they are to genuinely become lovers and not simply gratify impulse whenever they have the urge to do so.

So, some sort of controls have always been in force. Therefore, it should not surprise us that our Christian faith teaches us that in human life controls are important. This it is that the 7th commandment in placing some controls on human sexuality is doing something positive, something that affirms the goodness of human sexua1ity and is concerned with seeing to it that the very best expression of human sexuality is made possible for individuals and for society as a whole. The holiness of life and the gratification of biological desire cannot be separated without dehumanizing people.

That is why sex is so important to marriage and why marriage is so important to sex. In a marriage a man and a woman have committed themselves to each other as an expression of the desire to be united with each other and then sex becomes a further expression and a celebration of this commitment. The commitment in love can provide the right controls for human sexuality.

However, marriage is not magic, and sex can be adulterated in marriage as well as outside marriage. Spouse abuse, sex used as power or punishment or as a weapon, all these are a kind of adultery in the total meaning of the word.

2. Now in the light of such a Christian understanding of sex, we can see more clearly the meaning of the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” and what it means for us.

Because of its relation to life itself, because sex is good and is a gift from God, because of what sex communicates and because it involves the whole person, it is not to be adulterated, contaminated, degraded, abused.

This is made every more clear when we understand that the Hebrew word, which we translate “adultery” did not originally have any reference to a violation of the marriage relation, or to sex. It meant what we still mean when we use the word “adulteration.” Basically, it meant the mixing or the result of the mixing of a base substance with a pure substance. By the natural process of linguistic evolution, the word came to mean the perversion of good practices.

It was first used in this moral sense, not with reference to perverted sex relations, but to describe the perversion or adulteration of religious devotion by the practice of idolatry. Then when the word came to be used in the area of family relationships, it meant for the Hebrews that marriage is also a covenant relationship, it is the union of man and woman for the purposes of sex fulfillment, the procreation and nurture of children and the completion of the basic development and expression of the personality through the intimate communication and interaction with another human being.

This of course is the ideal and many marriages are quite a bit less than the ideal. There are many reasons for this. Sometimes we expect too much of marriage and we make a god out of it or out of romance. We may base a marriage on the illusion that our human love and romance are going to solve all of our problems or at least most of them. Marriage can’t do this, but our

resulting despair is great. Some people then run from one relationship to another looking for the ideal relationship and they merely escape from the failure of one relationship into the deceptive promises of the next. The end is to lose faith in love itself.

That's the reason adultery is often so tragic. It often comes about through the desire of persons to know love and to be loved and wanted. Perhaps that's why Jesus Christ was so forgiving of the woman caught in adultery, the woman who was about to be stoned to death.

The truest love story tells of both ecstasy and tragedy, reunion and separation, absence and presence. While we can tolerate tragedy in the love stories or the lives of other people, we find it unacceptable in the love drama of our own lives. Why can't we perfectly love those whom we love, and they perfectly love us? is a question often heard in one form or another. The reason is that our need for love is greater than our ability to give it.

That's why commitment in marriage is so important. The words, "in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health," tell us plainly that our life and love is not going to be perfect, and this seventh commandment reminds us that seeking illicit relationships outside of marriage is not going to help the problem.

At the same time, we in the church also need to recognize the fact that failure does sometimes occur in the marriage relationship and that the parties to such a failure should be accorded the same understanding and help in reordering and rebuilding their lives as are extended to those who fail in other endeavors. Who is there among us who has not failed in one thing or another?

And lest we should feel self-righteous concerning the 7th commandment, who is there among us who has not broken several of the other nine at least a few times? "Let the person who is without sin among us be the first to throw a stone," when we hear those words, we know that not too many-stones are going to be thrown.

"You shall not commit adultery," above all else invites us to look at the depth of human personhood, the depth of human relationships, the sacredness of human bodies so that we do not adulterate any of these sacred relationships. Amen.