Sunday, July 8, 1979
THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT
Exodus 20:15; Matthew 6:19-21

Sometimes the simplest and shortest statements can have profound implications which are not at first obvious. Such is the case with the three short commandments of the ten — number six, “You shall not kill,” number seven, “You shall not commit adultery,” and number eight, “You shall not steal.”

What could be simpler than this 8th commandment, “You shall not steal?” In its original form, it referred primarily to kidnapping, the stealing of a human being. In the ancient world, this was a wide-spread practice. Children in particular were often stolen and placed into indentured servitude. The Hebrews, a people who had been born into slavery, were not likely to tolerate a practice which led to any new enslavement.

As time passed, this commandment came to be more and more applied to the sacredness of property and possessions and the right to privacy. And still later in the Christian understanding, it came to have an even wider application as we will see in a moment.

In its basic form the commandment means, “You shall not take what is not your own.” But even that is not as simple as it sounds. How in a mass society do we define who owns what? Who owns the earth? “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof,” says the Bible over and over again. But how does that help us in understanding the eighth commandment?

This morning then, let’s look at this commandment on two levels: first, what does it say to us in our personal lives and our individual morality, and second, how does the commandment apply to our lives as we live them in groups, communities, businesses, and nations?

1. First, on a personal level this commandment is basic — not so much because our property is personally ours forever, but because there needs to exist in any society a sense of trust, and a respect for property and for human lives.

When too many people in any society no longer have respect for the privacy of others and for the property they have, chaos and anarchy begin to increase and no one of us feels safe. Everything has to be locked up tight and guarded. The time can come when we trust virtually no one and each person becomes his or hew own police force. In such situation the crime level soars and people are reduced to employing burglar alarm systems, arming themselves, taking pistol-firing instructions, installing padlocks on everything and living as if they expected to be robbed at any moment. Society becomes an armed camp. When those symptoms appear in the life of a society, that society is in a state of serious, maybe even, fatal sickness. Then it takes more than increased police protection, more than political oratory about law and order to heal that sickness.

What such symptoms reveal is nothing less than the breakdown of the cultural and religious values that hold a society together. The symptoms reveal a breakdown of a sense of community. In other words, what ultimately holds any society together is a common agreement on what is right and what is wrong. Our laws do not so much create that common agreement, but rather spell out in more detail what the agreements are. And there are some common agreements which are very basic to the health of any society. Such is the case of the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th commandments.

Thus, on a personal level there is general agreement among most people as to what the commandment “You shall not steal” means. It means a person shall not take by force or secretly, what is not one’s own, what one has not earned, or what one has no natural right to claim. You shall not steal means armed robbery will not be tolerated, nor shoplifting, nor breaking and entering, nor embezzling. Stealing comes in many forms and all these are prohibited by the 8th commandment — hijacking, skyjacking, plagiarizing, gypping, looting, swindling, cheating, deceiving, concealing defects, false labeling, giving short measures, exaggerating quality. Stealing can be in the form of false advertising, in not doing an honest job, in not paying an honest wage.

Too often we make the mistake of defining the 8th commandment too narrowly, in fact we like to do that with all the commandments. By so doing we can exclude ourselves and claim we have never broken them.

But the commandments are broad rather than narrow in their meaning and implications. Stealing can be defined as taking advantage of ignorance, manipulating people to purchase products they cannot afford and do not need, doing shoddy workmanship, or convincing someone that he or she needs some work done on an automobile or home which is really not needed.

Not too long ago we all heard news reports of a study done of automobile repair businesses particularly those along busy highways and how adept some of them were in convincing people that there was a lot wrong with their care, when nothing needed to be done; or having customers pay for work which was not done.

All of these types of stealing multiply distrust in society as a whole and weaken the social structure. In our time we’ve heard a lot about the growing incidence of “white-collar” crime — stealing from businesses where on works, padding expense accounts, inflating contracts, taking kickbacks, giving and receiving bribes, falsifying insurance claims — all are a form of breaking the 8th commandment.

People who wouldn’t think of taking even a postage stamp from their neighbor’s house, will at the same time take one or more from the business they work for. It’s a double standard. The more impersonal life becomes, the more some people do not hesitate to take things which do not belong to them. The more impersonal life becomes, the more the overall crime rate increases.

Several years ago, Vance Packard in his book, “A NATION OF STRANGERS,” reported on the accelerating crime rate in cities over 250,000. He found that as the population of a U.S. City increases, the number of crimes per 100,000 citizens increases at a much faster rate. For example, in cities with less than 10,000 population, the rate of assault annually was only at the rate of 29 per 100,000 population, whereas in cities of 100,000 to 250,000, the rate of assault was 83 per 100,000 population, but in cities over 250,000, the rate of assault was 154 per 100,000 per year. So, if you live in a town of over 250,000, you are four and a half times as likely to be assaulted as you are if you live in a town of 15,000. You are seven and a half times as likely to be robbed and near three times as likely to be murdered. And women are four times as likely to be raped.

All this happens despite the fact that as the size of cities grows, the amount you as an individual resident must pay in taxes for police protection consistently increases, as least in

cities above 90,000 population. In a big metropolitan area, you are likely to pay nearly twice as much in taxes for police protection as you do in a city under 100,000.

There's really no big mystery in why this is so. The impersonality, the anonymity of the larger city adds to the crime rate. There's less a sense of community. People who would not think of stealing from someone they know, find it less difficult to steal from a stranger or a large company.

In an experiment done a few years ago, an automobile was left on a street of a small city, Palo Alto, California, and another on a street of a big city, the Bronx area of New York City. In each case the hood of the car had been raise and the license plates removed. In each case the car was left in a white middle-class neighborhood and across the street from a college campus.

In Palo Alto, the care was left untouched for more than a week, except that when it rained, a passerby lowered the hood so that the engine would not get wet. In the Bronx, within a matter of hours and in broad daylight clean-cut adults and young men began stripping the car of its salable parts often within eyesight of others. There was no observable evidence that anyone cared or disapproved.

Impersonalism, not caring, not feeling responsible for anyone else — all these contribute to the breakdown of a society and the breaking of the ten commandments.

"You shall not steal." Thus far we've been talking about this commandment mostly on a personal level as individuals relate to one another or as businesses or organization relate to individuals.

But there's another level to this commandment. Its meaning is even broader. The 8th commandment also has to do with our stewardship, how we use, how we take care of and dispose of what we are in charge of, how much we waste. "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof." In the most elemental sense, the property we like to call our own, is not really ours. We human beings are, according to the Bible, acting on God's behalf as temporary stewards, caretakers of what is primarily God's and not ours. Thus, the things of the world are ours to manage and use, but not to misuse, and as each decade goes on in our increasingly crowded world, it becomes more and more obvious that we are not free to do what we will with these things.

In a mass society, private property rights and natural resources come to mean something very different from that they meant on the American frontier. Even the most conservative people will admit this when they rush to protect their neighborhood with building and zoning codes. Merely because the person next door to me has title to the land does not necessarily give that person the right to build a welding shop on that land instead of a residence.

However, a frontiersman of the old West did not have to be as sensitive to his neighbor ten miles away as we must be in housing complexes or on highway cloverleafs, or on where to build nuclear power plants. In an increasingly mass society, we cannot escape interdependence. The "public interest," as we call it, is a recognition of our common environment. Furthermore, now we must more and more think of generations yet unborn before we pollute our rivers, lakes, and seas and rob the land of its minerals and its capacity to sustain life. Increasingly all of us will have to be socially sensitive to the price the society will have to pay today and tomorrow for our overindulgence and the overpampering of our generation. We may be stealing from future generations.

So, our Christian faith and the 8th commandment cause us to ask some difficult questions. To whom do the natural resources of the earth ultimately belong? Do they belong to those who happen to own the land under which these resources are located? Do they belong to those who have the capacity to tap the resources? Suppose the irrigating of my land with underground water causes your wells to dry up on the neighboring land which you own and farm? The water underneath the land does not obey the property lines on the surface.

Can the Arabs legitimately bring the world to its knees simply because the world's oil reserves are not largely underneath Arab land? Should the stockholders of Exxon and Texaco be the primary beneficiaries of the offshore oil that lies, theoretically under international seas?

These are difficult and complicated questions that our society is going to have to consider over and over again as we become more and more dependent on each other. Who owns what and who has the power to control what, are not easy questions to answer.

So, we can see that the 8th commandment, "You shall not steal," has implications that reach far beyond shoplifting, embezzling and armed robbery. Living in a just society in this world, and as a good steward of God's earth, and yet maintaining privacy, freedom and individual initiative, while caring for legitimate public needs, removing exploitation, protecting the environment for today's and tomorrow's generations, and being honest in every individual transaction, all of these are covered in the meaning of the 8th commandment, "You shall not steal."

In addition, the 8th commandment means for Christians — putting aside all greed which leads to dishonesty and stealing. Jesus Christ reminds us — "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there will your heart be also."