Sunday, October 3, 1999
BUILDING ETHICAL MORAL FITNESS
Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-17

The Ten Commandments have been in the news a lot these days. There are politicians and other people who believe that our nation has lost its ethical moral fitness because the Ten Commandments are no longer taught or posted on the walls in public schools, in courtrooms, and in other public places. Those who oppose displaying the Ten Commandments in such places see it as a church-state issue, a First Amendment problem.

Personally, I wish that building ethical moral fitness was as easy as posting the commandments in various places. I know that you cannot build physical fitness by posting lists of exercises and good dietary guidelines. I also wonder how many members of Congress have the Ten Commandments posted on their office walls or in their homes? Or how many could even recite them?

What I've discovered is that many people who talk about the importance of the Ten Commandments know nothing about their history and can name only one or two of them.

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. It is significant that she did not also mention the failure of the home in this regard. 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.

This mother had a point, although, as I mentioned in last week's sermon on Integrity Deficit Disorder, there is often a wide gap between knowing what's right and doing what's right. Yet we have to begin with knowing what's right.

So I asked her, "Do you know the Ten Commandments?" "Of course," she answered, somewhat upset that I had dared to ask. "I wonder if you could name them for me," I replied.

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 steal." 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 very basic and solid rules to guide us. But I also suspect most of us would be hard-pressed to name them if asked. For your reference, they are printed in their short form on the order of worship.

What's the history of the Ten Commandments? According to Jewish tradition, they were given to Moses by God for use by the Hebrew people. God said to Moses, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Then follow the commandments. The first one: "You shall have no other gods before me." The God who is speaking is the God who has acted in a specific way in the particular history of a definite community.

In the Jewish tradition, these commandments became the basis for establishing a community with laws. No group of people can live together very long without laws to guide them. So these commandments were a gift. They were a sign of God's presence, God's grace in that community.

The community which owns and keeps these commandments distinguishes itself from other communities. The Hebrews understood that these commandments marked them as a particular people whom God redeemed out of Egypt. Other groups of people, nations, and religions might have similar rules, but some of these commandments were unique for the Hebrew people.

Because Jesus came out of the Hebrew tradition, his followers made these commandments their own as well. Jesus taught that following them does not earn us God's love. Rather, through these commandments, God becomes present to God's people as a living authority, pointing the way to an orderly and joyful life, and that's still true today.

All societies and the individuals who live in them need rules and ethical standards to follow in order to build a community and personal ethical and moral fitness. The Hebrew people found that these commandments were fundamental in helping them live together. The commandments reminded them of their relationship to God, helped to protect them from each other, and guided them into building their life together with a sense of personal integrity and an experience of God's presence.

The first four of the Ten Commandments have to do with our relationship to God, and the other six with our personal behavior and our relationship to each other.

The first commandment is listed first because it is the foundation upon which all the other nine are built. In its longer form, it states — and I'm paraphrasing—"I am the only true living God that exists. So do not worship any other gods except me." It is when we begin worshipping other gods, which are always false gods, that we get into trouble — the god of success, the god of money, the god of consuming or fame or pleasure for its own sake, or power, or any one of many others. The first commandment is the one that is broken by most of us time after time.

Paul Tillich, one of the most perceptive theologians of the 20th century, often defined a person's god as one's ultimate concern. Your god is that reality which elicits from you your deepest feelings and your utmost loyalty. It is what you give first priority in your life. Thus, every person believes in and worships one kind of god or another. The question is not, "Is there a god for you?" but "What kind of god does your life serve?" As I said in last week's sermon, the question, "Do you believe in God?" needs always to be followed by a second question, "What kind of God do you believe in?" Does it give you slavery or freedom? Does it diminish you or lead you beyond yourself? There are plenty of gods available to worship, but only one true living God.

Here are some additional questions to ask yourself in order to help you determine if you are worshipping the one true God. Does your life serve a unified whole? Or is your life split up into divergent, competitive values so that it lacks direction and purpose? If your God is the one true God, then there should be a unity and harmony that comes into your life by the worship of that "Oneness."

If God is One, 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 people of our own kind and another value by which we relate to strangers or people we consider to be different from us.

Commandments two, three, and four all relate to the first one: "Do not make idols of any kind." In other words, do not try to capture God in some kind of image. God reserves the right to define himself. "Do not misuse the name of God." "Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." In other words, set aside some time on a regular basis to rest and to worship God in order to keep your life focused.

The next six commandments are about our personal behavior and our relationships with each other: "Honor your father and mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not covet." The last commandment is almost as important as the first and, in addition to the first, is the one most broken. Coveting leads to dishonoring father and mother, to murder, to adultery, to stealing, and to lying and bearing false witness.

The purpose of these laws is nothing less than to form a community which loves God and respects and loves the neighbor. Thus, when someone asked Jesus to name the most important commandment, he gave a summary of all of them: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

As said, one purpose of the commandments is to help us live in a community which loves God and has respect for all human beings.

A second purpose of the commandments is that they form the guidelines for helping us as individuals to build ethical moral fitness.

Building ethical moral fitness is like building physical fitness. You're not born into physical fitness. It's not automatic. You reach it by giving a little effort each day. Sometimes that effort is unconscious, natural, and automatic, especially when we are very young. Babies stretch, move their arms and legs, and when they can walk, they run and play, and in that way, naturally exercise their muscles.

As we grow older, getting and keeping in shape requires a conscious, deliberate, sweat-for-sweat's sake effort of walking and other forms of exercise.

Reaching physical fitness isn't enough; you have to maintain it; otherwise, your muscles atrophy. What's more, there's no alternative to the real work of exercising over an extended period of time. You don't get it with a quick fix. Walking twenty miles in a single day and then not walking for the next two weeks is no substitute for walking regularly every day. Nor do you get physical fitness by osmosis. Hanging around active people, being a spectator at sports events, reading books on fitness — these can be worthwhile, sometimes even inspirational, but they just don't cut it when it comes to keeping in shape.

Keeping ethically-morally fit is much the same. You could come from the most moral, high-minded, right-thinking family in the world, and that's a help. You could have grown up in a community of honest and hardworking people, and that makes it easier to be ethical yourself. You have a good beginning. You might even have the good fortune to live with a highly moral spouse and work in an environment where your colleagues and superiors are naturally inclined

toward honesty, fairness, and a deep respect for one another — which is terrific. But that doesn't mean you are going to be automatically ethically and morally fit and remain that way.

To become morally and ethically fit and remain that way, you first of all have to know the basic commandments, the rules for behavior; you have to think about issues, wrestle with them, be mentally engaged, and you have to put your ethical principles into practice day after day. You have to act in moral, ethical ways, and the more you act that way, the stronger you will be. It takes practice, repeated practice. It also takes constant vigilance. New temptations always arise. One of the best definitions of ethics or morals that I've ever heard is "obedience to the unenforceable."

A student of the anthropologist Margaret Mead once asked her to describe the earliest sign of civilization in a given culture. She expected the answer to be a clay pot or perhaps a fish hook or a grinding stone. Her answer was "a femur." The femur is a bone in the leg. Mead explained that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to do the injured person's hunting and gathering until the leg healed. The evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization.

Compassion, ethical and moral fitness do not develop automatically in a given society. We need rules to guide us and an abiding faith in God to support us.

The Commandments are not to be seen as a terrible burden. They are just the opposite, a gift toward a more abundant life in community. In the Commandments, God becomes present to us. They point out the hazards on life's journey and give us the right direction.

The Psalmist wrote: "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." Amen.