Sunday, March 26, 2000
JESUS AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS
Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-17; John 2:13-22

The Ten Commandments are frequently in the news these days. Last Monday, the Lincoln Journal Star carried an essay about the Ten Commandments written by a senior from Lincoln Southeast High School. In June 1999, the U.S. House of Representatives approved an amendment to a bill that would allow the commandments to be displayed on state-owned property if the state or municipality chooses to do so. At a press conference, one of the members of the House of Representatives went so far as to claim that if the Ten Commandments had been posted in Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, the massacre would never have happened. I only wish solutions to complex problems were that simple. I also remember a controversy over whether or not the Ten Commandments could be posted in a courtroom in Alabama.

There is a problem, of course, as to which version of the Ten Commandments to post. The standard Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Jewish version? And which Jewish version? The one in Exodus chapter 20, read as part of our scripture reading, or another version in Exodus chapter 34, or the version in Deuteronomy 5? They are pretty much the same, but there are some differences.

For example, Exodus 20 lists not ten but fourteen imperatives, which some traditions have reduced to ten. But which ten? The number one commandment for Jewish believers is: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Other traditions regard this as merely a preamble and begin the list with the statement, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Exodus 34 has seventeen do’s and don’ts, whereas Deuteronomy 5 has fourteen. In some Christian traditions, the commandment against adultery is number six, and in others, it is number seven. Additionally, some religious traditions exclude the wife from the list of farm animals that one should not covet by making the coveting of the neighbor’s wife a separate commandment. None of the traditional lists prohibit coveting a neighbor’s husband. That’s because, when the commandments were originally given in the Hebrew tradition, wives were considered the property of the husband rather than equal partners in marriage, and the commandment is against coveting someone else’s property.

Public posting of the Ten Commandments might be a good idea if we could ever agree on which version to post. On the other hand, who are we kidding? Is this really going to lower the crime rate, curb violent impulses, reduce teenage pregnancy, stop people from worshiping false gods, prevent coveting, increase church attendance because of the commandment to keep one day in seven holy, cause us to honor our mothers and fathers, or hinder us from using God’s holy name in vain? According to stories in the Old Testament, it didn’t change behavior then.

Moreover, many young people view the posting of the Ten Commandments in their schools as hypocritical posturing by adults. A recent episode on a television program illustrates this. A teenage girl is caught cheating on an exam. She is immediately marched to the principal’s office, where she receives a stern lecture. Rather than expressing remorse, the young woman says something like this: “Is this where I am supposed to apologize and say I’m sorry? It’s not going to happen. Cheating is part of the real world. My dad cheats on my mom, my mom cheats on my dad, and both cheat on their income taxes. I live in a country whose president

cheats on his wife and lies to the American public. So don't lecture me on cheating and expect me to care."

I find that people like to talk about the importance of the Ten Commandments, but most do not even know what they are, including many of those in Congress who propose posting them. A recent poll of 1,200 people, ages 15 to 35, found that most were unable to name more than two commandments, and they weren't too happy about some of the others when they were told what they were.

In a previous sermon, I mentioned how 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 strongly that if all young people had to memorize the Ten Commandments, the world would be in much better shape.

The mother had a good point, but there is a wide gap between knowing what's right and doing what's right. Yet we have to begin by 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 would appreciate it 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 they are good, solid rules to guide us, especially as seen through the eyes of Jesus, who gave them new meaning, as we shall see. But I also suspect most of us would be hard-pressed to name them if asked. For your help, they are printed today on the Order of Worship in their short form.

The Ten Commandments, in their different versions contained in the Old Testament, came out of the living, moving, worshiping life of the Hebrew people and their relationships with the living God and one another. All orderly societies need rules and ethical standards. The Hebrew people found that these commandments were fundamental in helping them live together. They reminded them of their relationship with God and guided them in building their life together. They were certain these commandments came from God because when they lived according to them, the whole society benefited.

The first four of the ten have to do with our relationship to God, and the other six with our personal behavior and our relationship to each other. They are all based on the assumption that God created all there is and that each one of us is created in God's image. They warn us against corrupting that which is given as holy and good.

The beginning commandment is listed first because it is the foundation upon which all the other nine are based. In its longer form, it states, and I'm paraphrasing: "I am the only true living God that exists. So do not have any other gods except me." It is when we begin worshiping other gods, which are always false gods, that we get into trouble — the god of success, the god of money, the god of consumption, the god of self, or fame or pleasure for its own sake, or you name it. This 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, 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. Thus, your god might be your job, your family, or whatever attracts your strongest devotion. In that sense, every person has a god he or she worships. The question is not, "Do you believe in God?" but "What kind of God does your life serve?" Does it give you slavery or freedom? Does it lead to life or death? Does it diminish you or lead you beyond yourself?

That's why if you follow the first commandment, you are not likely to break any of the others. As St. Augustine said, "Love God and do as you please." When Jesus was asked, "Which commandment is the greatest?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

What Jesus did was take the Ten Commandments and give them a wider meaning. For example, the commandment "Do not kill" was originally interpreted to mean, "Do not kill a member of your own group or your own nation." Jesus, on the other hand, said in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard it said, 'You shall not kill,' but I say to you, do not be angry with your brother or sister... You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery,' but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Another way to summarize the Ten Commandments as reinterpreted by Jesus is, "Do not corrupt what is holy." That's one of the themes in the story of Jesus chasing the money changers and merchants out of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was considered the "holy city," and the Temple was the holy place of God in that city — the focal point. One part of the temple, the Holy of Holies, was so sacred that only the High Priest could enter it once each year. No one else would even approach it, nor could anyone see inside it, because it was separated by a heavy curtain or drape.

Commercial activities in the Temple were nothing new. They had been part of the Temple scene for years. So there's more to this story than meets the eye. One Bible commentator describes it this way: "We read the text too narrowly if we see here only a warning against Bible bookstores in the narthex, or raffles for the youth group, or bingo in the fellowship hall. The issue is carrying our pervasive acquisitiveness right into our worship."

It's even more than that. Jesus, in the same way as the Ten Commandments, was against the corrupting of that which is holy — the use of one's religion or any of God's gifts for false purposes. In this case, it was the making of profit by appealing to one's religious sentiments and beliefs. Jesus wasn't against legitimate profit per se, but these vendors and money changers in the Temple court not only had a monopoly, but were misrepresenting their goods.

Think of it this way: Suppose we set up a Bible sales booth in this church building and made a requirement that all worshipers had to have Bibles for their personal use in the worship service. Further, we stipulated that the Bibles purchased here were uniquely blessed by God and therefore more sacred than any other Bible, and you could only use a Bible purchased here for our worship services. This would be corrupting this building, the Bible, and the Christian faith this building represents. It would be an attempt to take advantage of a human being's respect for that which is holy. It's like a person running for office saying, "Vote for me because I am more religious than the other candidates. Furthermore, God wants you to vote for me. How do I know? God told me."

Any attempt to use God or God's name to accomplish one's own selfish purpose is to corrupt the holy. Church leaders do it. Business people do it. Politicians do it. Governments attempt it.

In cleansing the Temple, Jesus was trying to call it back to its central purpose. It was to be first and foremost a place for worshipers to experience the presence and holiness of God, and it was not to be used for anyone's personal gain.

Another point Jesus was making through his action is that the building itself can become an idol and therefore a corruption of the holy and in violation of one of the Ten Commandments. If this beautiful building we use for worship and other related activities were completely destroyed, this congregation and its mission would continue to exist. It would not mean that God's presence was no longer active in our midst. Our faith is not in the building but in God. The people are the church, not the building. The presence and power of God are not limited to any building or institution or church denomination.

Jesus said just that. If the Temple in Jerusalem were to be destroyed again, which it was, God is still God. God is still to be worshiped. At the same time, Jesus was not saying that religious symbols are unimportant. We set aside buildings and objects and call them holy to remind us that all of God's creation is holy.

In the creation stories in Genesis, we are told, "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good... So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it." As one of the Ten Commandments states, we are to set aside one day in seven to remind us that all things God made are holy.

This story of Jesus in the Temple also reminded the members of the early church that in the same way as the true faith of the Hebrew people could not be destroyed even if the Temple were destroyed, so also their faith as followers of Jesus could not be destroyed as a result of his crucifixion because, with God, there is always new life.

There is yet one more level of meaning in this story. In both the Old and New Testaments, we are reminded again and again that we are to think of our own bodies as "temples of God." The Apostle Paul wrote: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? Your bodies are holy because you are created in God's image and because God's Spirit dwells in you."

Since our bodies are holy, they are not to be abused, misused, or corrupted. This means that good health habits are a necessity for those who want to follow the way of Jesus. The use of drugs, because of the way they abuse the human body, is a corruption of the holy. Pornography is a misuse of the human body. We can also make an idol of the body and worship it. Again, all these points connect to the Ten Commandments as Jesus interpreted them. Amen.