Sunday, March 5, 2006
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (No. 1 in a Series)
Exodus 20:1-6

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 ideas, she suggested very strongly that if all young people had to memorize the Ten Commandments, the world would be in much better shape.

Maybe she had a point, although there is often a wide gap between knowing what's right and doing what's right. So I asked her, "Do you know the Ten Commandments?"
"Of course," she answered, somewhat angered that I had dared to ask.
"Name them," I said. 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.

Most of you have heard of the Ten Commandments, and most of you believe that they are some very basic and solid rules for living. But I also suspect that many of you would be hard-pressed to recite them if asked. Here's your chance to remedy that situation. In this sermon series on the Ten Commandments beginning this weekend, and in the discussion groups each week, you have the opportunity to examine the Ten Commandments and how they can guide you in your day-to-day living.

In this first sermon in the series, I will be discussing the first two commandments. Before I do that, here's some background I hope you will find helpful. Many of you have probably seen the movie, 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. Moses, as played by Charlton Heston, is holding two tablets of stone, and the fiery finger of God carves 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. They did not come from God fully written.

The Ten Commandments, and the writings of the Old Testament that contain them, came out of the living, moving, worshiping life of the Hebrew people. 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 rules helped protect them from each other and also aided in building into their community a dignity, a personal integrity, and a sense of the sacred. They believed these commandments came from God because when they lived accordingly, everyone benefited.

Incidentally, you can find the Ten Commandments, or parts of them, in three different places in the Old Testament, with slight variances. Also, today, various religious traditions number them differently. Every one of the ten can be found elsewhere in the Hebrew tradition; they are not mentioned solely in this list of ten.

The first four commandments define your duty to God, and the remaining six describe your duty to your neighbor. Now you can see why Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments by saying: "You shall love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You shall love your

neighbor as yourself." I suspect the reason that "ten" became the holy number is nothing more sacred than the fact that we have ten fingers on our hands, and that made it easy to teach the essence of the moral code.

In some listings, the first two commandments are combined into one because of their subject matter. So I'm going to combine them in this sermon, as they were in the scripture reading. The first commandment in short form is: "I am the Lord your God." The second in short form is: "You shall have no other gods before me."

The first commandment is an acknowledgment of God's existence. It states plainly: "I am the only God there is." This statement about God's being is a command to acknowledge and remember the reality of God's total claim upon your life. God is not an impersonal power. God is not an "it." God is not a person. Neither is God to be identified with nature, reason, fate, or any other philosophical or abstract concept. God is life. God is the source of all consciousness and, therefore, the source of moral purpose and ethical action. God is the loving energy that infuses all of creation.

This first commandment implies that you are not called to keep the Commandments in order to win God's love. You are called to keep the Commandments because God already loves you, and you are to love God and your neighbor in return. The first commandment, then, is a reminder to you of God's total claim on all of life. How you worship and how you live cannot be separated.

The second commandment is also a straightforward statement: "You shall have no other gods before me." This commandment is not given much attention today, and yet it is probably the commandment that is broken most consistently. Paul Tillich, one of the most perceptive theologians of the 20th century, often defined a person's god as your ultimate concern.

Your god is that reality which elicits from you your deepest feelings and your utmost loyalty, and is frequently a false god. Your god might be your job, your family, success, or whatever attracts your strongest devotion. With this definition of god, there are no atheists. Every human being has an ultimate concern. Every person has a god. The question is not, "Do you believe in God?" but, "What kind of god does your life serve?" What do you worship? Does it give you slavery or freedom? Does it lead to life or death? Does it open you to all that life has, or does it diminish you? If the god you believe in hates all the same people you do, then you know you've created God in your own image.

There are always 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 serving?

"You shall have no other gods before me." The danger of worshiping false gods is everywhere. Warding off the allure of false gods is difficult. That's because the ONE TRUE GOD is ineffable and mysterious. The mystery, the sacred, the partially known, and the mystery of the unknown can frustrate you. It's difficult to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty. Faith in a God that you cannot fully know can leave you feeling insecure. You want something more concrete. False gods, when you worship them, tend to give you what you want. It's easier to have false gods.

God cannot be summed up in a name. Moses wanted a name and all he got was, "I AM WHO I AM." God cannot be described. Only false gods provide this certitude. But watch, God seems

to say, you will know me when you encounter me. You will see who I am in the profound flashes of insight that cut through the darkness, in the hope that rises out of despair and suffering, in the loving touch of another, in a moral life where you resist the worship of self so others can prosper.

Household gods are so tempting — computers, your job, your wealth, your social status, along with the brands you wear and the cars you drive. All promise contentment and inform your identity. These household gods seem to offer well-being, health, and success. It's easier to see the false gods others worship. It's difficult to see your own. You depend on your false gods to give your life order and meaning. You depend on them to define your place in the world.

When you see the hollowness of your false gods, how they have led you to waste time and energy, when you smash these false gods and face the uncertainty of life, those who continue to revere the false gods turn against you. You are expelled from the cult, stripped of its identifying power, and left alone. It's easier to remain silent, to pay homage to a false god even after this god is exposed as a fraud. Those who worship false gods deal harshly with those who become apostates.

The false gods of nation, race, power, ethnicity, religion, gender, and class demand exclusive and false promises. These false gods always create self-righteousness and exclude others outside the circle. They subvert equality. But the fear of your being excluded, of incurring the wrath of those who worship these false gods, can make you willing to justify the ostracism and even abuse of others.

On the other hand, the worship of the One True God can join you with others in a community of forgiveness, love, and caring for each other. Human love is always directed toward God and others or toward the self. The worship of such false gods as status, possessions, and power always leads to the love of self. "You shall have no other gods before me."

The long form of the commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me," goes on to state, "You cannot make an image of God." Do not limit this statement to the making of idols, icons, or golden calves as the Hebrews did — idols that you can bow down to in your life. There's a more important and broader meaning to this commandment. It means God can never be captured. God can never be seen. God can never be made to serve your needs. No place of worship, no symbol, no sacrament, can contain God. You cannot put God in a box. God's sacredness cannot be captured completely in art, in architecture, or in any other way. God's being can never be described in total, not in a church, a creed, or even in the Bible. For example, the Bible is not to be worshiped, nor can it be installed as the infallible and inerrant revelation of the word of God without falling into idolatry. It's tempting to make it an idol, as some like to say, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it."

Idolatry is dangerous because it demands conformity. It will make you a slave to the system, for it suggests that deviation from the system is deviation from God.

The Christian faith as a system only approximates God. It can never capture God. It contains truth, but it is not to be equated with the truth. Our Christian faith, with Jesus at its center, points to God, but to the degree that it is a system devised by human beings, it must be acknowledged that God is always more than our human systems. It's so easy to become arrogant by taking our limited insights into the truth of God and claiming it is the whole truth.

The worship of the One God is supposed to open your life to the world, to call you to freedom, and to help you accept life's diversity, which is woven together in the one God.

False gods and idols will consume you. Only the small, mundane acts of life — acts of kindness for neighbors, friends, and family — can save you. Those who spend their final years waiting forlornly for a call from children they never bothered to know because they were too busy building careers must peer into the empty face of the idol they worshiped. Idols, when they finish with you, discard you. They keep you from God.

"I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me." These first two commandments, or their combination into one, are the most controversial of all. Here's why: If there is only one true God, no matter what name you give the Sacred, then there cannot be one law that applies to people you like and another law that applies to people you don't like. That's why Jesus said, "Love your enemies." There cannot be one value by which you relate to your own kind of people and another value to strangers.

If the God of life is present in every human being in creation, then you must treat every human being as sacred and holy. There can be no categorical denial of another's humanity.

If God is one, and you are not to worship other gods, then there can be no prejudice or bigotry, for every act of discrimination or injustice reveals that you worship other gods before you worship the one God. On the other hand, the worship of the one true God can call you into a deeper humanity that unites you with everyone.

"I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me." Amen.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. Have you seen the movie The Ten Commandments? What do you remember about it?
2. As you look at your own life, what are some of the false gods which tempt you?
3. Discuss the ways in which a religious system can be an idol and therefore a false god.
4. Discuss how the Bible could be an idol and therefore a false god. What is the Bible for you?
5. Discuss what "God" means to you.