Sunday, March 12, 2006
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (No. 2 in a Series)
Exodus 20:7-11; Matthew 5:33-37; Mark 2:27

The first two commandments of the ten in short form are: (1) “I am the Lord your God.” (2) “You shall have no other gods before me.” The third and fourth commandments in short form are: (3) “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.” (4) “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” These first four commandments deal with your relationship to God, or another way of describing it, your relationship to the Sacred, the Holy. The remaining six commandments, as you will see in future sermons in this series, are concerned with your relationship to others.

Before we dive into these commandments and what they mean for you today, here are several comments to remember about all of the ten. They are not to be seen as burdens to weigh you down but instead as guiding principles to bring joy into your life. They are not prefaced by an order, “Here are ten rules, obey them.” They begin with an announcement of good news, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery.” In other words, you are free. You do not need any false gods. You are free to take a day of rest. You are free from the tyranny of lifeless idols. You are free from the need to kill each other. You do not need to steal and covet as ways to establish your identity. The Ten Commandments announce “ten freedoms.”

When I counsel couples who are about to be married, I frequently remind them that the marriage vows they will be taking are not to be seen as burdens to weigh them down but as hopes and promises to guide them into a more abundant and joyful life.

Now let’s examine the third and fourth commandments. (3) “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.” (4) “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Both of these commandments have to do with maintaining respect for the Sacred, the Holy.

As with all the commandments, the temptation is to interpret these two commandments too narrowly. When people think of the third commandment, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of God,” they often consider it as a warning against profanity, and it does include that, as will be explained later. However, to truly appreciate the purpose of the third commandment in its context, it’s necessary to understand what the Hebrews believed about the significance of a name, especially the “name” of God.

For them, a name was more than a handy label to identify a person. A name carried power. To the Hebrew mind, the name of God was uniquely holy and powerful. A name was never to be used carelessly. The name of God was so sacred that no one would even say it. In the Hebrew view of existence, to have your name known by another was to reveal your character to another.

Today, as then, names are powerful symbols. When you say to someone, “Tell me your name,” you’re asking that person to tell you something very important and personal. To name a person or an object is to give it a measure of individuality. Naming a person gives that person uniqueness, a character of his or her own. Even very young children realize this. Call a child by his or her wrong name or mispronounce it, and the child will correct you. As adults, you want your name pronounced and spelled correctly.

To have your name attached to some act or deed which is not yours is a personal affront to you — and rightly so. A few weeks ago, the sermon was on “Identity Theft.” You do not want your name stolen from you and then used by another. The wrongful use of God’s name is something like that. To take and use the name of God is to act as if you are God’s representative. If with your words you ask God to damn someone, you claim to be representing God. This is religious hypocrisy. On the positive side, salespeople and others find special influence with potential customers when they can address them by name. You are honored when someone remembers your name. This helps explain the Hebrew attitude toward the name of the ultimate, the God who is not knowable in total.

These ancient Hebrews sensed that the Holy was beyond every image and any name. Because of this, they were at first reluctant to assign any name to God because no name or label could adequately encompass all there is to God. So when a name was finally given to God, it was the custom not to display it or pronounce it openly and to never use it in a disrespectful manner.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the third commandment deals with an attitude toward God’s name. Jesus underscored this in the Lord’s Prayer when he said, “Hallowed be thy name.”

The third commandment calls for respect for the sacred, the holy — not only God but what is sacred and holy in all of life. That’s why any kind of profanity is really a form of blasphemy. If you say to someone, “Go to hell,” you have usurped the place of God. You are not in a position to decide another person’s eternal destiny. When you use the expression, “For Christ’s sake,” in a flippant way, you are assuming that you are on the side of Christ and that those who disagree with you are not. Profanity ultimately expresses a kind of bankruptcy of language. Profane words lose their meaning in very loose contexts. I’ve heard people called, “stupid as hell,” and “smart as hell.” Can you be both?

Sometimes when a word like hell is used, it can even lead to humor. I recall a man in a bar who looked up and saw a fellow drinker who seemed familiar. “Where in hell have I seen you before?” he asked. To which the stranger responded, “I don’t know. What part of hell do you come from?”

This third commandment has an even wider meaning. It is a reminder that you are to keep your word. For the ancient Hebrews, if you did not keep your promise, you were taking the name of God in vain. To make a promise to another person was the same as making a promise to God. They recognized that human honor and the ability to trust the integrity and the word of another were critical necessities in the life of a community. A nation or a community that cannot trust its members’ word cannot long endure.

Jesus expanded the meaning of this commandment in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all; let your word be yes, yes, or no, no.” Remember as a young person, you might say, “I swear on scout’s honor,” or “I swear on a stack of Bibles.” Jesus was saying this kind of oath-taking should not be necessary.

So the commandment is saying, keep your word. Live up to your contracts. Keep your promises. Whether or not you use God’s name when making the promise, breaking that promise is a way of taking God’s name in vain.

Now let's examine the fourth commandment. It also deals with respect for the Sacred, the Holy: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." You could easily get into a debate on the subject of which day of the week is the Sabbath. For the Jews throughout history, and for Seventh Day Adventists in our time, it has been from sundown on Friday evening until sundown on Saturday, the 24 hours of the seventh day of the week.

The first creation story in the book of Genesis reminds you, "God rested on the seventh day and hallowed it," so you also are to rest from all labor on the seventh day. However, when you look at the Ten Commandments in the book of Deuteronomy, the Sabbath is not identified with the creation story but with the Exodus. The Hebrews and even their slaves and beasts of burden are to take a day of rest, one day in seven, because, says Deuteronomy, rest is essential to life. Human beings of every station, and even animals, are not to be exploited. Do not forget, says Deuteronomy, that you were slaves. Then you had no day of rest. Periodic rest from labor is a right of every living thing. It is a right guaranteed by God. Take a day of rest to remind yourself that God has freed you from all slaveries.

In his book, The Gifts of the Jews, Thomas Cahill maintains that this is one of the most revolutionary ideas ever introduced — one day of rest for everyone, a day of rest, one in seven. Observance of the Sabbath came to be the holiest liturgical practice in all of Judaism.

Most Christian denominations have since made the first day of the week, Sunday, the day of rest. It was not called the "Sabbath" but the "Lord's Day," because Jesus was raised from death on the first day of the week — Sunday — so that gradually became the new day of rest, a reminder each week of the Easter event. Now many people refer to it as the Sabbath.

The main point is this: every liturgical practice grows out of a deep perception of human need. In today's world, you need time to rest, to reflect, to be free from your normal routines, and to take time to relate to that which creates all of life. It is to be a day of joy and not to be seen as a burden. That's why Jesus said in his teachings, "The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath."

He made this statement because some of the people of his day were making the observance of the Sabbath a burden rather than a gift. How can you do that? By being too legalistic, by emphasizing the letter of the law rather than the spirit. Over a period of many years, hundreds of rules and regulations and definitions were added in order to guide people in the most proper observance of the day of rest. For example, at one point, thirty-nine different kinds of work were specifically prohibited. No medical attention for chronic or non-emergency situations was allowed. When Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, he was severely criticized. It was not considered an emergency situation. One Sabbath day, when he and his disciples were walking through a grain field and the grain was ripe, his disciples were seen to be rubbing some of the grain in their hands so that they could eat it. They were criticized for working on the Sabbath.

In the novel Crow Lake by Mary Lawson, the narrator tells the story of her great-grandmother Morrison, who fixed a book rest to her spinning wheel so she could read while spinning. One Saturday evening, she became so absorbed in her book that when she looked up, she found that it was half-past midnight and she had spun for half an hour on the Sabbath day. Back then, that counted as a major sin. Would God ever forgive her?

What then is important about this fourth commandment which tells you to take a day of rest?

First of all, the Sabbath is not primarily about rules. These are imposed by institutions which seek conformity and control. It is about the freedom to take a day of rest. It's about a change of pace. It's taking time to reflect on the Sacred. It's taking time to refresh your body and soul. You've heard the phrase, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." A vacation is a long Sabbath.

The fourth commandment reminds you of the need for the human spirit and body to step aside from the usual routines of life on a regular basis. It's necessary to build that kind of time-out into your weekly schedule, otherwise it's not likely to happen on a regular basis. Whatever day you call the Sabbath — be it Saturday or Sunday or some other day because you work on weekends — does not mean that the Sabbath is more holy than other days. Rather, you name one day holy or sacred to remind yourself that all days are holy or sacred. That's the wisdom handed down from the Jewish tradition and later in the Christian tradition.

A wise rabbi said, "God stopped to show you that what you created becomes meaningful only when you stop creating it and start to think about what you did and to reflect on what you created. You have to remember to stop because you have to stop to remember."

The Sabbath is about honoring those you love and those who love you, and in so doing, you honor the essence of the Divine. The Sabbath is taking a time of rest to remember and to nourish all that gives meaning in life. The Sabbath is for consciously connecting you to what is transcendent. It reminds you that you are to rest in order to honor the Divine in you, to remind yourself that there is more to you than doing what you do at work or other activities during the week. The Sabbath is to the week what the line break is to poetic language and what the pause is in music.

The third commandment states, "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of God." The fourth commandment states, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." Both remind you of the sacred in life. Amen.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. What are some of your best memories about Sundays in your family? What are some of your worst memories?
2. Discuss what the terms "Holy" and "Sacred" mean to you. What are some of the most sacred memories you have? What things are "Sacred" to you in your life in the present?
3. What bothers you about profanity, the misuse of God's name? Give examples of how God's name is used in wrongful ways in your experience.
4. What are some of the ways in which your name has special meaning for you? Do you know why your parents gave you your name?