Sunday, March 26, 2006
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (No. 4 in a Series)
Exodus 20:15-17; Matthew 6:19-21

Today's sermon is the last one in the series on the Ten Commandments. It will deal with the last three commandments: (8) "You shall not steal," (9) "You shall not bear false witness," and (10) "You shall not covet."

"You shall not steal." On its most elementary level, it means, "You shall not take what is not your own." Bible scholars say that in its original form, this commandment referred primarily to the stealing of a human being. In the ancient world, this was a widespread practice. Children in particular were often stolen and placed into indentured servitude. The Hebrew people, who had been liberated from slavery in Egypt, were not likely to tolerate a practice that led to any new enslavement.

As time passed, this commandment came to be more and more applied to property in addition to human beings. But that is not as simple as it sounds. How do you define ownership? Who owns the earth? Who owns the underground water in Nebraska? "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," says the Bible over and over again. Can you truly ever own anything? Certainly, you cannot own anything eternally, for one day you will die. Remember the story Jesus told about the rich man who thought his life consisted in the abundance of his wealth. He kept saying to himself, "I am so rich, I will keep building more buildings and acquiring more goods, and someday I will be able to say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods, relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This night you are going to die, and all the wealth you have, whose will it be?"

How you come into ownership of property and how you transfer it is the subject of many legal disputes. That's why legislatures, lawyers, and courts are necessary.

On a personal level, this commandment is basic not because your property is personally yours forever, but because there needs to exist in any human society a fundamental respect for the privacy and property of others. Without that respect, chaos and anarchy take over, and no one feels safe. Everything has to be locked up tight and guarded.

"You shall not steal" means that you shall not take by force or stealth what is not your own. On a personal level, stealing takes many forms: robbery, hijacking, plagiarizing, looting, swindling, deceiving, false labeling, hiding defects, giving short measure, false advertising, not doing an honest job, padding your expense account, and more. Stealing includes many deceptive practices that erode trust in society.

On the corporate level, stealing takes place in many ways. Almost every day, the Wall Street Journal carries a story about corporate stealing. It's done through insider trading, creative accounting that reports phantom profits, and the misuse of stock options. The savings and loan fraud of the 1980s, which the Attorney General called "the biggest white-collar swindle in history," cost the country anywhere from $300 billion to $500 billion. Health care fraud is estimated at $100 billion to $400 billion per year. When government agencies, public institutions, and corporations can no longer be trusted, when they become engines solely for the personal gain of a few, it sends a message that honesty does not pay. More stealing is the result.

The eighth commandment, “You shall not steal,” has implications that reach far beyond shoplifting and armed robbery.

The ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness,” is similar to the third commandment in that it involves human speech. Remember the third commandment, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of God.”

We’ve all heard the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” That’s only partially true. Words can be very harmful. Jesus said, “I tell you that on the day of judgment you will render account for every careless word you utter. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

From human speech come words that build relationships, express love, bring peace, pronounce blessings, and proclaim liberty. Parents separated from their children, lovers and friends separated from each other, know the joy of hearing the human voice.

Isaiah, Jesus, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Winston Churchill, and others like them knew the immense power of words and leadership. With their words, they inspired many for the good.

From the same gift of human speech can also come lies, gossip, slander, curses, words of hate, and words which you wish you had never said — words that deeply hurt others. Violent language, words of prejudice, can be as harmful as violent deeds. Hitler used the power of speech to lead a nation in the wrong direction. The innuendo and false accusations of Senator Joseph McCarthy damaged many people’s lives. Bearing false witness takes many forms.

Another common form of bearing false witness is gossip. Why is gossip so tempting and prevalent? Because it is often an attempt by an insecure person to gain power. By passing on gossip, a person is announcing that he or she is important, that he or she has sources of information that you do not have. Gossip can ruin reputations.

When you pass on gossip, you are in fact cutting down the victim. In the mind of the insecure person, cutting someone down enables you to mistakenly believe you have raised your own position.

This commandment originally had its setting in a court of law. To lie when a person was on trial for his life, and the truth or falseness of the charges being investigated could cost him his life, was to strike a blow at the very heart of the system of human justice. Today it is called perjury.

Lies, rumors, and innuendos hurt. They hurt the victim, and they hurt the originator. They destroy the fabric of life and the sacred fabric of trust which are essential to living together.

There is yet one more kind of bearing false witness that is more subtle, so that you can break the commandment without being aware of it. This kind of false witness arises out of human ignorance — the kind of ignorance that perceives a part of the truth and proclaims it to be the whole and final truth. It is the kind of ignorance that refuses to consider new data and continues to repeat false and prejudicial assumptions.

This type of bearing false witness takes place in every aspect of life. When Copernicus and Galileo discovered that the earth was not the center of the universe and demonstrated that the

sun is the center of our planetary system, many people refused to even consider the new evidence and continued to bear false witness to the old paradigm.

This happens in religious life too. Some religious people continue to claim they have all the truth and that anyone who disagrees with them is outside the realm of God's love. Doesn't it make more sense to believe God is larger and more mysterious than any human frame of reference? Religious history is filled with examples of the disastrous results of people who have elevated their partial truths to the level of ultimate truth. When you begin to recognize your limitations and your blindness, your need to bear false witness begins to fade, and the search for more and more truth becomes exciting.

The tenth commandment in short form is: "You shall not covet." This commandment is no doubt the most difficult one to keep. The other commandments deal with outward actions, but this one deals with your innermost attitudes. It has to do with greed. With the tenth commandment, you have come full circle. The first two commandments state: "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me." Coveting can lead you to worship false gods of many kinds.

Before I proceed further, this distinction must be noted: There is a difference between desire and coveting. This commandment is not against human desire. Desire in itself is not wrong or evil, although unrestrained desire can lead you to do wrong.

Desire can lead you down a wrong road. Desire for other goals can lead you down the right path. The goal of your ultimate desire will determine whether you are heading toward life or death. For example, if your main desire is to make as much money as possible, that desire could destroy you and others. On the other hand, if your main desire is to find a vocation that will use your talents and give meaning to your life, then that desire can lead you to find fulfillment.

There is nothing wrong with the kind of desire that leads to honest ambition, drive, the pursuit of excellence, and hard work. These same qualities can become destructive if you employ them for selfish gain alone, to get ahead at others' expense, or for greed's sake.

In other words, desire in itself can be good. It's inspiring to see people who love life, who search for beauty, who desire to do good, those who seek to fulfill their potential, those who are not afraid to risk their talents and who want to keep growing in knowledge and experience. These are all legitimate desires.

Coveting, on the other hand, is misplaced or corrupted desire. It is the act of placing a thing or the momentary fulfillment of a need into that ultimate place of worship. It is pretending that something other than God can finally give you life, something you want so much that you will do anything to obtain it. It can throw your whole life out of balance.

You've known individuals who have wanted something so much that they reorganized their whole life in an attempt to obtain it. If they failed, then their life came apart. I knew a person who for years had his eye on a particular position in a company where he worked. Coveting that job became the center of his existence. He was sure that if he got it, it would solve most of the problems in his life. Finally, he got the position, and it almost destroyed his life.

The proof of the destructiveness of coveting is that it is a disease that is not cured when the objects of your coveting are finally achieved. You only raise the ante. You want more of the

same, or you seek a new frontier that will fill your emptiness. The only cure for covetousness is prevention.

Again, do not misunderstand. There's nothing wrong with the desire to get ahead. There's nothing wrong with setting and reaching goals in your life. What is wrong is when you make a certain goal your god and come to believe that achieving that goal will solve all your problems and take away the emptiness that fills your life. What you discover is that the emptiness may be taken away temporarily, but it returns.

This tenth commandment is in a way the summation of the Ten Commandments. It was listed last because it sums up all the other commandments. If you can keep from coveting, then you have no need of false gods; you have no need to take the holy name of God in vain. You have no reason to violate the holy day of rest. Coveting is what leads to dishonoring your parents and other longer-living people. It is what motivates people to kill, to commit adultery, and to bear false witness.

With the tenth commandment, you have come full circle. These Ten Commandments illuminate every human emotion. They underscore the sacredness of life and of human relationships. They are as ancient as Moses and as modern as tomorrow. Every generation needs to hear them and inwardly digest them. Every generation needs to interpret them anew in the light of new occasions.

Jesus did that in the Sermon on the Mount. He also did that one day when a man came to him and asked which of the commandments was the greatest, the most important. He wanted to know if he could not keep them all, which one he should emphasize the most.

Jesus did not list one as being more important than the others. They cannot be pitted against each other in some priority list. But they can be summarized. Someone asked me a similar question the other night in a discussion. She asked, "What are your absolutes?" I answered with the words of Jesus: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you are to love your neighbor as yourself." That is why the best way to describe the purpose of the church and its ministry is: "The increase among people of the love of God and neighbor." Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What concerns you most about the many kinds of "stealing" that are present in this country today? What about the "legal" theft that occurs, where individuals have not technically broken the law but have still in effect broken the eighth commandment? Who owns the underground water in Nebraska?
2. Discuss the many ways that human beings, including yourselves, break the ninth commandment, "Do not bear false witness."
3. Discuss how the tenth commandment relates to our "consumer" economy. Do we encourage people to "covet"?
4. The tenth commandment in its long form says, "Do not covet your neighbor's wife," but says nothing about not coveting your neighbor's husband. Why is that?