

The Ten Commandments Reading: Exodus 20:1-17 Lent 3/B

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In 1933, Nazi Germany introduced legislation which excluded Jews from organizations, federations, political parties, and ultimately, all public life. The goal was to make the German nation a 'pure' nation, whose bloodlines excluded all that was Jewish. Those Jews who held civic positions were fired and all that was Jewish or perceived to have Jewish influence in Germany was removed. Eventually, Jewish property was confiscated, Jewish books or books written by Jewish authors were burned, and Jews were excluded from participating in national sports and performing music. Jews were finally forced out of the country and sent to concentration camps where they were either murdered or worked to death. These steps were all part of a process intended to make Germany into a pure "Aryan" nation.

So the question becomes, how did all of this happen in a nation that was over 95% Christian? How could a nation justify murdering innocent citizens? How could church-going Christians support hateful laws and acts against the Jews, knowing full well that their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, was a Jew? My sense is, that the people of Germany, including many of its clergy, professors, and leaders, worshipped other gods, like the gods of power, Nationalism, violence, and greed. They failed to obey the 1st Commandment which commanded both Jews and Christians to worship one God: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. What I would like to talk about today are the 10 Commandments and I will use today's text from the Book of Exodus.

There is a grass roots movement in the United States which feels that if we post the Ten Commandments in public places, then our country will get back on track with its values and all will be well in our society. Of course, most people already know the Ten Commandments including the German population who supported the 3rd Reich during the 1930's and 40's. We all know that we shouldn't kill, lie, steal, or sleep with someone else's wife. But knowing the right thing and doing the right thing are two different issues. Since all Scripture needs to be interpreted and inwardly digested, simply posting the Ten Commandments would do little to enhance our obedience to them.

We need to keep in mind the sort of people who first received the Ten Commandments. They were not a Sunday School class on an afternoon outing. The Hebrew people of 3500 years ago were a wild and uncontrollable tribe of former slaves. Many were probably thugs and cutthroats. Moses, their leader, had once murdered an Egyptian. Without the commandments to guide them, they would probably have destroyed their whole civilization by fighting among themselves. The commandments required a certain orientation towards God and a posture of goodwill toward each other. In other words, the commandments are condensed in the Great Commandment summarized by Jesus: love God and love your neighbor. It is this orientation towards God and a posture of goodwill toward each other that helps us follow the commandments in our daily lives, even when times get very difficult as was the case in post WWI Germany who was defeated and humiliated by the demands of the Treaty of Versailles. Let's take a closer look at the commandments.

The First Commandment is perhaps the most important and difficult of them all. It reads: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." It is my belief that if we were to faithfully keep this commandment, by placing God before all others (including ourselves), then the remaining 9 commandments would fall into place.

The 1st commandment does not deny the existence of other gods. In fact, the ancient Hebrews believed in other gods, also referred to as idols. However, the 1st commandment demanded total allegiance on the part of Israel to one God, YHWH. It insisted that none of the other gods were to receive Israel's loyalty. The First Commandment required the Hebrew people to mobilize all of its life, in every sphere, around one single loyalty by serving YHWH without any distractions or compromises.

This was not easy for the Hebrew people just as it is not easy for us in the 21st century. We live in a world of options, alternative choices, and competing voices. It does us no good to pretend that there are no other offers of well-being, joy, and security except for the biblical God of the Jews and Christians. The additional "gods" that we worship are cleverly disguised, but we sacrifice to them and obey them

every day. Some of the names of these gods are Wealth, Power, Body Image, Education, Material Goods, and perhaps our most cherished god, 'The American Dream.' We often sacrifice our children to the god of wealth, chasing after material riches while neglecting to spend quality time with our kids. These lesser gods (or idols) can be defined as an entity or a power that strongly influences the ordering of our life, our values, our focus, our time, and our actions. If we were to worship and be faithful to one God, we would probably honor the Sabbath day and let go of the many idols that influence our values.

I thought it would be interesting to report on the latest articles in the New York Times/Washington Post where the 10 Commandments are blatantly ignored. Let's start with the **5th Commandment**: "You shall not commit murder!" Yet, the war in Gaza continues. As of today, more than 70% of those killed in the Gaza Strip are innocent women and children who now number around 25,000 persons. Several thousand more are on the brink of starvation. The creation of an apartheid system, controlled by Israel over the Palestinian people, is at the core of the continued violence in the Holy Land. Then of course, there is the death of activist Alexei Navalny who was poisoned by the Russian government in 2020. He recently died as the result of a lack of medical care while in prison on false charges. While claiming to be a Christian, Putin's thirst for power takes precedence over his regard for human life and justice.

The 8th Commandment reads: "You shall not steal." This warning is something that Wall Street and Congress need to pay more attention to. How has it come to be that we have a trickle-down economic system which, during the last 50 years, has turned millionaires into billionaires while turning the working class into the working poor? With insider trading, obscene CEO pay, wage theft from ordinary workers, Wall Street's continued gambling addiction, and corporate payoffs to friendly politicians, this kind of theft is threatening our democracy. Insatiable greed and power are the primary 'idols' actively operating within these institutions, rejecting the will of God and slowly destroying our civilization.

The 10th commandment says: "You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor. This is the only commandment that applies directly to thoughts rather than external actions, although often times, actions do follow. To covet means to earnestly wish to possess something or to desire that which someone else has. Coveting has to do with having more, receiving more, and wanting more. If you think about it, the United States' economy thrives on people coveting more and more stuff. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York recently reported that credit card debt has hit a record high! Collectively, Americans owe \$1.13 trillion on their credit cards. This Report sheds light on the growing debt issue in America where younger consumers are facing great risks to their economic future. Coveting is a hindrance to true worship and faith in God because where a person's treasure is, there her heart is also.

While I could spend another 3 hours sermonizing about the 10 commandments, I would like to close with **the 9th Commandment**: "You shall not be a false witness." A viable human community depends on truth telling. In order for a society to move forward, there is a basic need to be able to trust one another's word. The prohibition against false witness is something we need to revisit and take more seriously in our society today, especially in our political sphere. There is a tendency to collapse the truth into propaganda in the service of ideology. Public versions of the truth are not committed to a portrayal of reality, but to a rendering that serves partisan interests such as the impeachment hearings against President Biden. We hear of doublespeak, words that make lies sound like the truth, alternative facts, and credibility gaps. Perjury has become all too familiar. How can we make decisions, how can we vote, how can we maintain honorable relationships with each other unless we speak the truth?

Returning to the beginning of my sermon, I believe that at the core of our disregard for the 10 Commandments is our refusal to worship one God. This struggle reminds me of an old country western song that goes: "Trying to love two women is like a ball and chain...sometimes the pleasures are not worth the pain." And so it is with God. We can't love different gods or idols and expect to have a society based on justice, compassion, and the dignity of every human being. So if you are looking for a life steeped in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, then I suggest you revisit the 1st Commandment and take it seriously.