

Lent 3, Yr B, March 4, 2018, Emmanuel
Exodus 20:1-17; Ps. 19; 1 Cor 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

The Ten Commandments. We've just chanted them as part of the Lenten Penitential Office and here they are again in our readings.

So familiar – in some ways. However, that familiarity, as well as the perverse ways the Ten Commandments have been used politically, has bred some contempt for them.

Which is really unfortunate because they are an extraordinary set of guidelines for human society and connection with God.

Separating them from the symbolic nonsense that sometimes surrounds them, this week I read them very slowly, *listening*. Amazing!

The first one is not a commandment at all; it's a statement – the same statement spoken in each of God's Covenant promises:

in Creation, to Noah after the flood, to Abram as we read last week, now on Mt. Sinai to Moses and the Israelites,

and finally, to us in the Covenant of the Incarnation, Jesus. Each time it's the same statement: I will be God to you.

I am committed to you. I love you. And because I love you, I offer you freedom, from fear, to live with joy and wholeness, in relationship:

the words say, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you, [who brings you] out of the house of slavery."

Only, you can't keep putting yourself back into slavery. Because that's what happens whenever you try to fill the God-space in your being. with anything other than God.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol," says God. What do we make paramount in our lives?

Whether it's material things – "my truck, my gun and my woman," stocks and bonds, good-looking physiques, our addictions –

or conceptual ideas –reputation, patriotism, rights – idolatry will always land people back in slavery.

God knows that.

God also knows the human tendency to claim what *we want* – using God's name. The words: "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God."

I don't think the third commandment has nearly as much to do with swearing as it does with those kinds of claims.

How many wars have been fought with the claim of "God on our side!" How many times has God's name been used to justify oppression or discrimination or genocide?

How many prosperity gospel preachers claim that God wants them to have four homes and a luxury jet – just send me your money.

How many times do people say to a grieving survivor, God needed another angel in heaven?

What does the psalmist say, “Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins?”

It is a serious and even dangerous thing to invoke the Name of God for petty, selfish or heinous actions.

The fourth commandment is to rest, to make room in our lives for Sabbath. Some years ago, a friend of mine and her family made Sabbath a priority in their life. Their Sunday became a quiet but precious family time.

They didn't shop, or clean, or play video games, and there was no late Sunday afternoon dread of unfinished homework.

Ultimately, she said, it was freeing, not burdensome.

There it is again. God offers freedom, the kind of freedom that lives in relationship, in the human social realm as well.

Honoring the elders and honoring the children, holding to the value of human life, faithfulness, not taking other people's stuff, telling the truth.

In the tenth commandment and as Jesus confirms in the Sermon on the Mount, it's not just about actions taken, it's about what is harbored in the heart:

don't even let envy fester in your heart, nor hatred, nor any other harmful desire. The basis for healthy human society.

I was fascinated in John Steinbeck's classic, *The Grapes of Wrath*, by the code of behavior that grew up among the traveling people making their way from the Oklahoma dustbowl to the promised land of California.

They weren't called the Ten Commandments, but they were very clearly akin, especially to the last six.

But all ten are about relationship. No wonder the psalmist speaks as he or she does:

this way of being revives the soul, it leads the innocent not into cynicism but into wisdom;

this way of being is just, and so it rejoices the heart and gives light to the eyes; let me live this way, O God, in the words of my mouth and in my interior thoughts as well.

But --- the unilateral free gift of God's total generosity is something that we humans don't "get."

We are deal-makers – I'll do this for you and you do this for me; I'll scratch your back, you scratch mine.

Think about it. The economy of the world, the social arrangements, all the systems that run the world –

the political system, the religious system, the economic system, and even the day to day operations among people are in one way or another, about making deals.

The corollary, of course, is that if you won't do this for me, I won't do that for you. You have to make it worth my while to do something for you.

People say, "My children are grown; why should I pay taxes to support the schools?"

People say, "I've got mine; why should I care about you?" When people say things like this, they are betraying our fundamental shared humanity, but the comments come from a deal-making mindset.

So it didn't take long for people to see God as the biggest deal-maker of all, instead of the source of "a free flow of spiritual life and love that cannot be bought, bartered, bargained, or bribed," as commentator John Shea puts it.

It didn't take long for people to exchange the Covenant, the guidance of God meant to help them live peaceably in a community of love, for a system of deal-making and creating in their minds a God who says, "you keep my rules and I'll bless you, you break my rules and I'll punish you."

No wonder so many people see God this way. Without spiritual transformation, we can't wrap our minds around a God whose love holds creation together, whose love is expressed as free gift, whose love is poured out in self-giving.

In the lesson we read from John's Gospel, Jesus makes it clear that human wisdom, the wisdom of this world that Paul describes in the Epistle lesson, twists the wondrous Law of the Lord from Covenant Relationship into a transaction,

turns the unconditional offer of God "to be God to us" into a conditional "if-then" exchange.

That is what Jesus is demonstrating when he upturns all the tables of the money changers in the temple.

The temple worship, while ostensibly being about the Sinai Covenant, has become an exchange:

"God and worshippers relate commercially. Exchange is the name of the game. ...The worshipper gives God a sacrificial animal and, in return, God gives the worshipper forgiveness for sins and help in various endeavors."

Is that so foreign to the way people often understand Christianity? Is that just a construct of the Ancient Near East?

Or does it sound familiar, maybe even on some level at least, the way we ourselves might think.

I'll be good and God will bless me. I'll keep the rules and God will reward me. God punishes people who break the rules. God's love for me is conditional upon my keeping my half of the bargain.

A bargain. The language of the marketplace, the temple marketplace that Jesus upends, scattering tables, animals and money boxes all over the place.

The God that Jesus calls Father is not a deal-maker; that God is a lover.

God, in Jesus and in the Ten Commandments, desires relationship, connection, and the greatest good for us and for all God's creation.

God desires *true* freedom and abundant life for God's people.

That's why God gave Moses these tablets of the Law – here is the way to live abundantly and freely with God and with other fellow humans.

It's for that reason that Jesus accepts his death at the hands of the so-called wise of this world and promises his third-day resurrection, an opaque reference totally lost on them.

It's why Paul says, "[though] Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, we proclaim Christ crucified [and yet alive], ...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

And finally, it is for this reason that Mark's Gospel account of this same incident says "My [Father's] house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations."

A house of prayer, a place of relationship, with God and with other people in God. Will we be such a place?

Posting plaques of the Ten Commandments on the courthouse lawn won't make it so, but prayer will.

Being the Body of Christ, the Beloved Community of the risen Lord Jesus, will. Intentionally learning who this God is, who has promised to be God to us, will.

Serving the world around us in God's name, will.

May we be a house of prayer; may Emmanuel be a place where we and those who come here meet God in true relationship. Amen.

*John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, Mark, Yr B, "Third Sunday of Lent," pp 90-94.