

Engage Bible Study | Ten Commandments

October 5-7, 2015

Let's play a little true and false.

In Spokane, Washington it's against the law to interrupt a religious service with a horse race. True or False?

It's against the law to store snowballs in a refrigerator in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. True or False?

In Florida, it's against the law for unmarried women to parachute on Sundays. True or False?

If there's a donkey sleeping in your bathtub after 7:00 p.m. in Oklahoma, you're breaking the law. True or False?

Anyone who detonates a nuclear bomb within the city limits of Chico, California is subject to a \$500 fine. True or False?

There are a lot of little-known, wacky laws on the books in towns and cities across America...and probably all over the world. But there is one set of laws that is perhaps better known than any other on the planet, and while they are often ignored they are anything but wacky. They are wise and life-giving. We know them as The Ten Commandments.

But before we get to the Commandments we need to catch up on what's happening in God's story since last week's Engage session. Last week we heard the story of God calling Moses to be the one through whom God would speak to Pharaoh and set the Israelites free. For 400 years the Israelites had been held as a slave labor force to build the expanding Egyptian empire. They cried out for freedom and God responded.

It's hard to overstate the importance of this story. It served as a foundation for Israel's understanding of God and themselves. It was so important that every year the Israelites would gather as families around the dinner table and tell the story of how their God had set them free. We know that family meal as the Passover Feast. The Exodus story became one of the primary lenses through which the early Church understood what Jesus' life, death and resurrection were all about. The God who once set the Israelites free from their Egyptian bondage, was now setting all creation free from our bondage to sin and death. And just as the ancient Israelites used the Passover meal to remind them of God's saving love, we use Holy Communion as a way to remind us of the saving love of God revealed in Jesus. Do you see the connections? That's how important the Exodus story is.

But the story doesn't end with God convincing Pharaoh to set the Israelites free. It continues as Moses leads the people on a journey toward a new home, a land flowing with milk and honey.

And shortly after they escape through the Red Sea and make their way into the desert God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. Turn to Exodus 20. Now page through the next dozen chapters or so. What do you notice? It's full of laws about many different aspects of life. Why do you think that God gives the people the Ten Commandments and many other laws at this time in their history? Because the nation had been living as a slave culture for 400 years. They didn't know how to live any other way. In a sense, it was easier for God to get the Israelites out of slavery than it was to get slavery out of the Israelites. They struggled to live in the freedom of trusting in God. Seen from that perspective the Ten Commandments were given to provide a pathway to freedom, not to somehow limit the Israelites' freedom.

I really like how one author, Brian McLaren, understands the Ten Commandments through that lens:

1. Put the God of liberation first, not the gods of slavery.
2. Don't reduce God to the manageable size of an idol— certainly not one made of wood and stone by human hands, and not one made by human minds of rituals and words, either, and certainly not one in whose name people are enslaved, dehumanized, or killed!
3. Do not use God for your own agendas by throwing around God's holy name. If you make a vow in God's name, keep it!
4. Honor the God of liberation by taking and giving everyone a day off. Don't keep the old 24/ 7 slave economy going.
5. Turn from self-centeredness by honoring your parents. (After all, honor is the basis of freedom.)
6. Don't kill people, and don't do the things that frequently incite violence, including:
7. Don't cheat with others' spouses,
8. Don't steal others' possessions, and
9. Don't lie about others' behaviors or characters.
10. In fact, if you really want to avoid the violence of the old slave economy, deal with its root source— in the drama of desire. Don't let the competitive desire to acquire tempt you off the road of freedom.

This is the pathway that God charted for the Israelites, to form them into a people who were no longer slaves, but free to trust in God's love and grace. However, as we read the story the Israelites struggled to live into that freedom. They complained against God. They whined about

God's provision. They lived in contempt of God's saving love and said that they would rather go back to living as slaves in Egypt. Turn to Numbers 14, and let's see how that worked out for them!

To set up this part of the story...the people are afraid to enter into the Promised Land as they stand at the border, the Jordan River. Ten of the Israelite spies said that the land was filled with giants too powerful for them to overcome. Two of the spies encouraged the people to trust God and enter the Promised Land.

Numbers 14:1-4 ... see how the people respond

Numbers 14:11-12 ... God's response

Numbers 14:13-19 ... Moses prays for the people, asking God to forgive them

Numbers 14:20-23 ... God's response: Wilderness wandering.

- Those who once lived in slavery will die in the wilderness
- God will use the 40 years of wilderness wandering to shape a new generation of people who will serve him ... blessed to be a blessing

Forty years after the Israelites were set free from their Egyptian bondage God once again brings them to the boundary line between the desert wilderness and the Promised Land: The Jordan River. And what happens as they stand once again at that border? Turn to Deuteronomy 5. What do you find? Why do you think the Ten Commandments are given again at this juncture of Israelite history?

By the way, what do we as Christians tend to think about when we think of the Jordan River? It's where baptism happens ... the boundary between the old life and new life in the Kingdom of God which has come in Jesus. Turn to Matthew 3:

Matthew 3 – baptism in the Jordan ... a new juncture in history

Matthew 4 – Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days ... a period of formation. That's what the wilderness is all about. We, too, walk through the wilderness! THEN Jesus invites people into a new "Promised Land" called the Kingdom.

Matthew 5 – The New Commandments for living in the freedom of life in Christ. But look what Jesus does with the commandments (Matthew 5:21ff with "do not kill"). Now it's a law of the heart!

See how the pattern is repeated? Slavery, wilderness & formation with a new pathway to freedom?

So, how do Lutheran Christians read and understand the law? Lutherans talk about three uses of the law:

1ST USE OF THE LAW -- "Curb"

The law provides order for society. They are like the curb of a road...or like rumble strips on a highway.

2ND USE OF THE LAW -- "Mirror"

The law helps us to see our own sinfulness in light of perfect obedience. It forces us to face our need for God's grace in Christ because we seem bent upon wanted to earn God's love by being good. But that's a dead end.

3RD USE OF THE LAW -- "Guide"

It shows us how to live as a follower of Jesus. It reveals the path to Holy Living...not to earn God's love but to experience real life.

Living in a right relationship with the law and understanding it is really important.

Unfortunately most of us have been taught to view the Ten Commandments as a list of God's demands. And when we view the Commandments as demands issued by a demanding and punitive God:

- We use them as a vehicle to earn God's love and acceptance.
- They only serve to incite sin (Romans 7)
- We turn them into a "to do" list instead of a "become" list. In other words, make them into minimum standards rather than letting them change our hearts and drive us to God's grace (think Sermon on the Mount)
- Shame becomes a hammer that pounds our sinful desire more deeply down, warping our soul. Then we project our shame by demonizing others who are doing the very things we secretly wish we were doing. (Think of the number of religious leaders who railed against sexual sin, only to be revealed as engaging in the very things they railed against)
- We use them as a big stick to beat up those who are disobedient. In other words, the Commandments became a way to divide people up between "good" and "bad", insiders and outsiders, an identity marker.

In other words, when we view the Ten Commandments as God's demands they become like shackles that enslave us, and given the context of today's story that's the last thing God desires! But we can even take these pathways to freedom and make them a new bondage, which is what the Israelites did. It was meant for freedom. Perhaps that's why the Law is revisited right before the Israelites pass through the Jordan River to enter into the Promised Land. Even a

promised land doesn't guarantee freedom. Nothing external can guarantee real freedom. Real freedom is in relationship with Christ who truly sets us free with love, forgiveness and power to change our hearts and minds.

Questions? Let's spend some time in conversation around your tables.