

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Bart Roush**  
**Exodus 20:1-17**

Let us pray.

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. In the midst of the multitude of words in our daily lives, speak your eternal Word to us that we may respond to your gracious promises with faithfulness, service and love. Amen.

Our reading this morning is the giving of the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel through the leader Moses. This is one of the covenants that God makes with humanity. A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties and details the promises and responsibilities of each party. There are five primary covenants in the Older Testament, two of which come before the Ten Commandments. The first is the covenant God makes with Noah to never again destroy the earth. The next is a covenant between God and Abraham where God promises that Abraham will have a vast number of descendants. We then get to God giving the Ten Commandments for the people through Moses. The people of Israel have been enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt and eventually escape. They make it to the base of Mount Sinai where God tells Moses that God will make the people a treasured possession, a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation. They will be a blessing for the whole world. The Ten Commandments will teach them how to be a blessing.

Listen for a word from God.

Then God spoke all these words: 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.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Many years ago, there were a number of court cases concerning the Ten Commandments. One of these court cases made their way all the way to the Supreme Court in 1980 and it had to do with whether it was OK to have the Ten Commandments displayed in public spaces, specifically in public school classrooms. In a split decision, it was determined that the Ten Commandments could not be displayed. There were several more cases brought in the early-2000's as well but then fewer cases were brought forward. In the period from 1980's into the 2000's the so-called culture wars were often fought on a religious basis. Issues were framed in scripture reading, prayer, and invoked the Christian faith. The thought was by some that if we just put prayer back in school and if we displayed the Ten Commandments prominently those things would solve the ills of society.

Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann preached a sermon in 2006 entitled, "Called Against the Distortion," in which he said, "Too bad the Ten Commandments have been cheapened and moralized to become a vehicle for cultural wars. Because the commandments are not simple little moral rules. They are, rather, God's abiding markers against all distortions of life that are sure to occur when the holy reality of God is displaced from the center of our existence. When we depart from the commands of God, we are sure to get a distorted life. The summons of Sinai is that the people called by God are to live a faithful life as an alternative to the distortions we have just witnessed...I believe that now the church must think afresh what such a faithful life would look like, because it is now God's call to the church to live according to God's purposes in the midst of a deeply distorted society."<sup>i</sup>

The Reformed tradition, of which the Presbyterian Church is a part, has throughout its history understood this response to the Commandments. It has understood that one of the things that the Ten Commandments does is highlight that we are not able to follow the commandments completely, thereby making us realize

our need for God's grace. Indeed, the commandments start with a statement about God's relationship to us. "I am the Lord, *your* God..." These are not just rules given to us, but they are guidelines for our relationship, and come to us only after God has claimed us. God has delivered the people out of Egypt first, God has saved first, and only after does God give the Ten Commandments. God establishes a relationship first, and then and only then, does God make a claim on our behavior. While we may fall short of the commandments, it reminds us that God is a graceful and saving God who claims us even before we can obey. Grace comes first, and then instruction. Rescue precedes rules.

This leads to another understanding of the Ten Commandments, and one that is specific to the Reformed tradition, which is that the Commandments provide us with a guide for grateful living in response to divine grace. This understanding allows us to understand the Commandments as more than "diving finger-wagging or moral hand-slapping."<sup>ii</sup> The Ten Commandments become guidelines for responding to the grace we have received.

The Ten Commandments given to Moses describe a vision for the way in which the covenant between God and God's people is supposed to be ordered. "The Commandments come as a gift from God to the people... to structure their common life, and to shape individual lives that are worthy of the God who has rescued them and with whom they are in covenant."<sup>iii</sup> The Ten Commandments are part of a living relationship and are given to enable the people to stay in covenant relationship with God as a gracious gift.

The Ten Commandments are separated into two ways. The first four commandments are God-centered and focus on our relationship with God; things like not having idols, refraining from taking the Lord's name in vain, remembering a time for Sabbath. These are commandments focused on our individual relationship with God. The last five are neighbor-centered and focus on our

relationship with others; things like forbidding murder, not lying, stealing, or coveting our neighbor's spouse or things. These are commandments focused on how we act with one another. The first part of the commandments describes the vertical dimension, our relationship with God. The second part of the commandments describes a horizontal dimension, our relationship with those around us.

The fifth commandment, "honor your father and mother," is a sort of bridge between the first four and the last five. They link the divine human relationship in the first four commandments with the communal relationships that govern the last five. It takes the positively formulated first four commandments, "You shall..." and states the fifth in a positive manner, before stating the next commandments in the form of a prohibition, "you shall not..."

The fifth commandment, "You shall honor your father and mother," also calls to mind for many the parental image of God. That in the best sense, we can look to God as a loving parent. Jesus frequently called God, Abba, or Father. And the tone of these last five commandments is very much in the voice of a parental warning, "You shall not." These commandments are like a parent saying to a child in effect, "in our family, we don't lie, we don't murder, we don't steal." "This is not what it means to be in our family, this is how we act and how we do not act."

The structure of the Ten Commandments connects how we interact with God with how we interact with others. Our ethics are grounded in our faith and vice versa. Our relationship with God and with others has the same purpose – to shape our identity and character as a holy people. Our identity in God is to be shaped by the commandments. Our respect and worship of God are the foundation for showing respect and love to others.

*Because* we have received the saving grace of God and that love lives in us, *therefore* we have hearts of love and do acts of love. Ours is a faith that is a “because-therefore” faith and not an “if-then” faith. Our faith is not based on “if you follow these commandments, then you will receive God’s love. Rather, “Because God loves us and God’s love lives within us, therefore love flows out of us from God.”<sup>iv</sup> Our faith is a “because-therefore” faith. As I have told you before, one of my favorite words in all the bible is “therefore.” It’s my favorite because that’s where the rubber hits the road. Because of God’s grace – therefore we respond and act in this way. And I take great relief and hope knowing that we do not have an “if-then” faith, but a “because-therefore” faith.

Earlier this year, the Texas legislature debated a bill that sought to place a copy of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom. A few other states also had similar bills. The Texas Senate passed the bill, but it stalled in the Texas House and was not passed. Some of the debate on the bill went viral on social media when a Texas State Representative, James Talarico, argued against the bill from his perspective as a Christian. He questioned the bill’s author by asking her questions that were grounded in scripture and love of neighbor. Representative Talarico is the youngest member of the Texas House, and he also happens to be a Presbyterian seminary student at Austin Seminary.

In an interview, Representative Talarico explained what moved him to go to seminary. He said, “This may seem like a weird career move for a politician—campaign consultants don’t usually tell their clients to become Presbyterian ministers—but my faith is *why* I’m in politics. Growing up, my church taught me that love must grow into justice. My church taught me that faith must move us from the sanctuary to the streets... Religion always pointed me toward politics, but now politics is pointing me back to religion. After 4 years as a policymaker, I’ve come to believe the root of our

many problems is spiritual. Our inability to love ourselves, our neighbors, and our planet is killing us. Our world is in a spiritual crisis. I want to understand this crisis and be part of the solution.”<sup>v</sup>

In addition, Representative Talarico said, “if my Christian faith is serious, it will have a daily and direct impact on how I engage with others and my society. Do not advocate in the name of Christianity, but advocate as the person that you have become because of your Christian faith.” Let me repeat that last line, “Do not advocate in the name of Christianity, but advocate as the person that you have become because of your Christian faith.”

Our faith can help us find meaning. It should build connections and community. It should not be used to hurt. Grace first and always. The commandments invite us into a gracious life, for all. Walter Rauschenbusch, a theologian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a prominent thinker in what was called the Social Gospel. He suggested that the commandments were important, particularly those that described life between fellow humans. He said the second part of the commandments, “grow more important all the time. Science supplies the means of killing, finance the methods of stealing, the newspapers have learned how to bear false witness artistically to a globe full of people daily, and covetousness is the moral basis of our civilization.”<sup>vi</sup>

These words ring true still today. Rauschenbusch declared, “To be a Christian is to be concerned about the ways in which existing social structures are infected with features which guarantee that poverty, racism, the rape of the environment, inequality, class conflict, and other human ills will continue to be embedded in our daily realities. To be a Christian is to be committed to changing these social structures.”

He said, “Good theology absolutely must be public theology. What is theology, if it’s not talking about our collective lives and the

meaning and purpose of our lives and how we're supposed to live together and who God is, in ways that are part of our conversation together?"

Our God calls us to a faith that is taken seriously that cannot separate us from our daily lives or isolate us from the world. While our faith may be personal, it should never be private. Instead of worrying about displaying the commandments, our purpose should be living them. Love must grow into action. Our faith must have feet. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.pcusastore.com/Content/Site119/FilesSamples/180790TheCollec\\_00000147123.pdf](https://www.pcusastore.com/Content/Site119/FilesSamples/180790TheCollec_00000147123.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Craig Kocher, *Pastoral Perspective* on Exodus 20:1-17 in *Feasting on the Word*, page 76.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Edward Markquart, *The Hinge, The Two Great Commandments*, from the course *The Life of Christ: A Study in the Four Gospels*.

<sup>v</sup> <https://tfn.org/rep-james-talarico-is-rev-james-talarico-is-rep-james-talarico/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/freelancechristianity/your-faith-is-not-just-about-you/>