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The 10 Commandments – “The Law of Reflection”

Romans 13:8-10

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Exodus 20:1-5a

²⁰Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You 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. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God

Every day, we are challenged to make sense of the world as it unfolds around us, and to place judgements about what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, what is just and unjust. When we turn on the news, scroll through our Facebook feed, or share in a conversation with friends or family, we are confronted with issues and debates that we must weigh in on, and decide where we stand. How often do we stop to wonder what we are using as our moral compass? What criteria do we use to decide? What is it that determines which political party is most ethical, which laws are most moral, which national policies are most just?

This country was founded by people who immigrated here so they could live the Judeo-Christian ethic, based on the 10 commandments better than they thought was possible for them in the lands from which they came. It's time for us to ask what meaning those ethics still have for us today. What are the 10 Commandments, and what do they mean now? Are they still meaningful for us or are they obsolete? If we are really a people who are grounded in the 10 Commandments, then what does that mean for us now: in this

town? in your house? on your block? in your life? in your schedule? Is there anything in them to really care about, or are they simply artifacts of another world?

This morning, we are kicking off a new sermon series, one that will take us through the summer months, as we explore the meaning and role of the Ten Commandments in our lives. In this series, we're going to look first at the historical understanding of each of the commandments (what did the Hebrew people understand about each one), and then we're going to look at life as we're living it now, and ask how these commandments might still apply today.

According to scripture, about 1400 years before Jesus lived, the leader of the Israelites, Moses came down from Mount Sinai and presented the people with a set of laws... these laws were different than any others established at the time... they were meant to reflect the mind of God, not Moses. These laws were principles rather than prescriptions. Rather than laws with consequences, they were 10 words meant to create human community. They were not legally enforceable... for how do you punish someone for coveting, or not remembering the Sabbath? How do you drag someone into court on that basis? How can you tell if in someone's heart, some "strange god" or "idol" might be lurking? The 10 Commandments are laws of the heart... they are not laws of anyone's commonwealth... They were meant to shape attitudes and spirit. They are not meant to restrict you from life... but rather to lead our lives and communities into fullness and faithfulness. The 10 Commandments tell us what's worth focusing on in our own personal lives. They're a new vision of what it means to be a good, healthy, happy, authentic, human community.

Interestingly, there's only one place in scripture where the Sinai tablets are actually called Commandments (in Exodus). They're not really statutes at all, since there's no punishments. Instead throughout scripture, they are referred to as the "Decalogue" – the 10 words of the community in dialogue – they are 10 ideas, ideals, propositions, proposals that make the chosen people a different kind of people. They are 10 words about creation, and personal responsibility, about praise and esteem, the value of life, the integrity of our relationships, about voracity and honesty and self-control and simplicity of life. They're written in 2nd person singular. You shall.... They're written TO you for the sake of the community you create around you. We are not convicted by them, we are to be transformed by them.

And so we turn and begin with the first Commandment, asking what does that mean and look like in my life. In our scripture from Exodus, we heard, "I, the Lord, am your God, you shall not have strange gods, other gods, beside me."

The Hebrews always recognized Yahweh as the greatest of the gods, but the recognition that there is only one God comes very slowly in Hebrew history. The Israelite people were surrounded by a culture that had local gods and tribal gods, and even gods with special interest, like travel, water, and childbirth, and there are places in our Old Testament where you can see the Israelites wrestling with an understanding of one God among many, rather than true monotheism of "there is only one God". It's not until 600 years after Moses, that because of the prodding of the prophets, the Israelite people begin to wrap their minds and hearts around a true understanding of monotheism.

In the Hebrew tradition, this first commandment is actually treated as two commandments, I am the Lord your God, there is one God... and thou shall not have strange God's before me. In the Western tradition, that has moved into one commandment. While it is not common in our contemporary culture for us to see people pick up an icon or a statue and worship it as a god... all of us have other (little 'g') gods tucked away somewhere that tug at our attention and priorities... We worship the god money, and power, we seek the god "public approval", and success, and it can take a lifetime to see what of ourselves we have lost on these lesser deities, the ones we've spent our time and energy idolizing, hoping to gain the favor of.

The power of this first commandment is that it continually calls us back to remember what is really important in life, and that is God. We have idols we worship that block our vision to know our true selves, that obstruct us from growing to full spiritual stature, that are clouding our ability to see the glory of God around us, and none of these idols are a substitute for a living relationship with God.

- The power of money does not save. We look at people who have a lot of money and we say, "Wow! They have everything!" Well, no, really, they don't... they just have money.
- The loss of the self in one empty relationship after another, does not bring joy. Social connections can never replace the love that we deny ourselves.
- Our satiation of the senses, in order to avoid the life we have, only dulls our ability to embrace life in its fullest, which is why the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol simply keep us coming back for more...

None of these things bring more meaning, joy, or fullness to life! Because in the end, what we're trying to do is satiate the soul, and when we don't do that, we try to plug the feeling of emptiness we feel with something... anything... but to no avail.

When we are able to come back to this first commandment, this one God, around which everything else revolves, it re-centers and grounds our lives, urging them to reflect the heart of the one true God, calling us all together, rather than pitting us against one another. When the heart of God is ultimate, when glorifying God (rather than ourselves) comes first, our perspective changes... our worldview shifts and what is just, good, and right becomes a little clearer, and a lot less focused on what we get out of it.

I invite you to reflect this week about what is ultimate in your life? What is it that holds the most meaning and sway over your decision making? And to think honestly about what "little g" gods have crept into your life, and how God is calling you to reprioritize to make sure that what matters most is truly reflected in who you are and how you live. I pray that we might all re-center and re-ground our lives in the heart of the God of love and life. Amen.