

COMMUNITY BOUNDARIES

Scripture Readings: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Texts: Psalm 19:7-11; Exodus 20:20

The Decalogue—the Ten Commandments—is one of those things that we know we should consider as important but other than revering it, we really don't think about it that much. For instance, polls show that most citizens in the United States do not know all of the Ten Commandments. In fact, more people know the ingredients of a Big Mac than know the Ten Commandments. The only commandment that over half the people knew was (as reported in the polls): You shall not kill. Even that is not really correct as I will discuss in a moment. The rest of the commandments are known by less than half those polled.

Maybe part of the reason people don't know all ten of the commandments is due to confusion on our part. Jews, Roman Catholics, and Protestants number the commandments differently; so if you post your version of the commandments in a public place, a large number of people will think that the list is incorrect. I suppose it is no surprise at this numbering confusion because ancient manuscripts have a different number of commandments ranging from 8-11. Further, the two versions we have in the Torah have differences!

Some of our confusion may come from misunderstood concepts of the commandments themselves. For instance, the commandment against misusing YHWH's name does not mean using God's name in a fit of anger; rather it applies to swearing on God's name in a court setting. The same applies to bearing false witness; it is not about lying in day to day circumstances, it is about lying in a court against your neighbor. The commandment to not kill should actually read: you shall not murder. The Hebrew word used in Exodus can be traced back to blood feuds in ancient times where one family would retaliate against another because that family had caused the death of a member of the first family. As you can imagine, such blood feuds could quickly escalate to all-out war between the two families. Hence the practicality of the commandment 'you shall not murder.'

These misunderstandings remind us that the Ten Commandments were composed in a different culture than ours. The commandment against having no other gods before YHWH assumes that there are other gods. In ancient Israel, the people originally had practiced what we call henotheism; that means your God is the first god among others.

We also make assumptions about the ‘you’ addressed in all these commandments; we assume that the ‘you’ means anyone who reads the commandments regardless of age or gender (and I would hold that for us, such a reading is correct.) For the first readers of the commandments, though, the ‘you’ would refer only to adult men—women and children would not count. We get an inkling of this cultural norm when we read the final commandment: You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife... Notice who is missing?

Once you understand the cultural assumption behind the commandments, it makes the reading about the keeping of the Sabbath more interesting. The part that the lectionary cuts out, verse 10, reads: 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. Did you notice who is missing in this case?

The commandments are toothless. They have all these ‘shall not’ or ‘honor’ clauses with no consequences. If you do steal, what is supposed to happen? The commandments give us no clue; that is certainly not a problem with the rest of the Torah!

Yet the Ten Commandments do have importance and meaning if we would actually consider them as instructive. Rather than try to find loopholes, dilute them, or ignore them, we should try to understand the intent behind the giving of the commandments. The rabbinic schools in ancient times wanted to understand the commandments as way of living and most of these schools finally condensed the commandments to silver rule: What is hateful to you, you shall not do to others. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus condensed the commandments to two parts: You shall love God with all your being, and you shall love your neighbors as yourself. These condensed versions get us to understanding the heart of the commandments; our job is to understand them as a way of living.

I think it helps if we would not think of the Ten Commandments as a list and I think that is one of the problems with a display with all the commandments nicely numbered. We don’t get to take each commandment each day and check them off. We should think of the commandments as a whole that support a structure that cannot be taken apart. The great “Bible scholar,” Stephen King, actually did this in a creative way in his book, The Stand. He suggested that commandments are really about stealing whether we’re talking about things, marriages, lives, or a name.

More serious Bible scholars suggest that when we read the commandments, we should read the second commandment as the second half of the first; the third

commandment would be read as the third part of the first two, and so on. The commandments build on one another—so you have no god before YHWH then it only makes sense that you would not create an idol out of creation (lest you create a god before YHWH), and if you only have one god not represented in created items then why would you abuse God’s name? The commandment to honor our parents then becomes a bridge between our relationship with God and other humans. In our relationship with other humans, if we’re not going to murder, steal spouses, or things, then surely we would not ever covet these things.

Girardian theologians point to the last commandment as the starting place. Girard created the concept of mimetic longing; in his anthropology, he says that humans want to imitate one another and in that imitation, we desire to have what another has. If we cannot have what we desire, we will take it and attempt to justify our violence as sacred. In that justification we want to define the nature of God and that definition looks surprisingly like us and unlike others we consider outsiders. When we lay aside our desire—coveting—then the rest of the commandments fall into place as conditions of laying aside our desire including our desire to define God.

I think that in any of these ways of understanding the Ten Commandments, we can understand them as a guide to relationship and boundaries for a community. They provide us a way to respect and honor God, and a way for us to respect one another. The address ‘you’ puts us into a much larger context; we are invited to live in a way that reflects awareness that the world is more than just about me.

I fear that too often we live in a world that encourages us to live only for ourselves so that we become less conscious of how of our living impacts others. I was struck by an interview on NPR with a parent of one of the victims of the shooting in Las Vegas last Sunday. His daughter lay critically wounded and this father reflected that the shooter had committed a selfish act that impacted the lives of thousands of other people. The phrase, “selfish act,” grabbed my attention; for me, the phrase is so much more powerful than the many other trite and tired clichés that have been flung about in regard to the shooting. “Selfish act” reminded me that we are all capable of impacting thousands of others in the way we live; our selfishness may not be as direct as the shooter’s, but our desire for things and pleasure has an impact on others, and not always for the good.

The commandments remind us that we live in a connected world. We do not live alone, we are part of a much larger creation. The world was not made just for each one of us to take and use as we individually please. God made us for community, and community must have some sort of order and boundaries in order for us to honor

and respect one another. Such boundaries are not onerous or a burden, they are a way for us to reflect the love God has given us.

No wonder Jesus summed up the commandments for us as: Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself.

I wonder what would happen if we took these instructions to heart and lived this way. How might the world change?

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