

SERMON: What SHALL We Do?

3-7-21

TEXT: Exodus 20:1-17

My son and his wife are expecting their first child in mid-May of this year, and I will become a grandmother! We are all very excited. One of the first questions they asked me was what I would like to be called. It came as a bit of a surprise. I just figured I'd be called whatever they decided to call me - or whatever the baby himself comes up with once he starts babbling. But my niece asked me the same question, adding a list of options. Grandma, Nana, Mimi, GiGi. Just so long as it's not "meemaw" or "mammaw," she pleaded. Some of these choices I hadn't heard of or thought about before, and it was fun to imagine something a little different. I finally decided I would like to be called GiGi.

About a month ago, a package arrived in the mail for me. I didn't remember ordering anything for myself, and Christmas was long past. When I opened it, I found a gift card from my son and daughter-in-law and this decorative wooden sign with a title across the top: "GiGi's Rules." As you might imagine, the items listed barely qualify as rules. Instead, they are wonderful descriptions of the fun and loving relationship between grandmother and grandchild. But I just discovered, there are ten of them! "Grandchildren welcome anytime. Hugs given often. Sleepovers encouraged. Bedtime is negotiable. Always know you are loved.

Laugh, giggle, snuggle. Create lasting memories. Tell stories and play games. Anytime is dessert time. Some spoiling may occur.” At the bottom of the sign, it clearly states, “What happens here stays here.”

I so look forward to experiencing all of these and making them come true for me and my grandson and any other future grandchildren.

That being said, I’m not foolish enough to think that I won’t have to discipline my grandchildren or set boundaries on their behavior. Of course, I will. And that’s an important part of how I will demonstrate my love for them. I also know that they will not follow the rules perfectly, but the love will remain no matter what.

The stone tablets which Moses received from God with the Ten Commandments may have been of similar size to my list of GiGi’s rules, but a great deal heavier, and not nearly as decorative. And, of course, not anywhere near as fun. And yet, I’m afraid most of us view God’s commandments much more negatively than they were intended.

Hearing or reading about the Ten Commandments could be compared with attending your first college course and reviewing the syllabus. You enter all excited about this new adventure and the opportunities for learning, for experiencing independence, and for growing into adulthood. And then you're handed a four or five page syllabus of the readings and assignments and attendance requirements necessary to pass the course. It seems like an impossible load to bear. And then you add three other classes to the load. Not only has all the wind gone out of your sails, but the boat is beginning to sink, and you don't know how to swim!

We treat the Ten Commandments like a checklist or a scorecard for getting into heaven. Especially in the middle of Lent, when we're trying to be just a little more disciplined toward fasting, prayer, and charity, to then get this list of "Thou shalt nots" is more burden than we can bear.

But, as one biblical scholar (in agreement with many others) points out, "The Commandments come as a gift from God to the people of Israel 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. They should not be read as divine finger-wagging or moral hand-slapping. To be bound in covenant with God

is to be set free to live as God's people. God's gift of the law to Israel is a means of protecting the community, now that they are no longer slaves, and opening a path to the flourishing of life, both communal and individual." (Craig Kocher, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2)

In fact, the Commandments are not so much laws or requirements with consequences, but more accurately could be thought of as directions or teachings. They still come with consequences, not in the form of punishment, but in the natural consequence of a breakdown in relationships and in society. Instead of a slap on the wrist or a failing grade on a report card, our life and our relationships are damaged and become more difficult when we don't live by God's commandments.

I remember being a kid - a pre-teen, I guess, whenever I was given the responsibility of being "in charge" of someone else, it felt exciting to have some authority. To be able to make the rules or to "lay down the law" and demand that my subjects obey. I now know what to call that feeling. A power trip.

That's not what this is. God is not on a power trip with the Ten Commandments. God doesn't need someone to boss around or to "toe the line."

It's more like God is giving us the recipe for making sure the bread turns out just right.

The first four commandments are God-centered. "Aimed at establishing a right relationship between God and the elect people," as my former Old Testament professor wrote. Though all the commandments seem to be directed to an individual, "they are intended to regulate community life." (W. Sibley Towner, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2) Here God is setting out his expectations for how we are to relate to God. This needs to be our number one relationship, our top priority. God, our Creator, wants to be at the center of our lives. Not to feed God's ego, but for our sake.

I like how this first commandment was explained in a book called, *No Other Gods*. "Other things shall not even begin to exist as gods in our lives. We won't worship them, we won't look to them for salvation, we won't depend on them to fill the aching loneliness in our hearts, we won't work for them, we won't serve them, we won't give up our power to them." (Ana Levy-Lyons, *No Other Gods; The Politics of the Ten Commandments*, 2018)

Regarding the second commandment, *You shall not make for yourself an idol.... You shall not bow down to them or worship them*, the author of *No Other*

Gods takes a hard look at our materialistic society. “What a world of trouble we’ve gotten ourselves into by worshipping things! Material wealth and appearances are optical illusions. We’re never going to find true happiness, real relationships, or a deep connection with the living, loving God if we don’t let go of our idols.” (Ana Levy-Lyons, *No Other Gods; The Politics of the Ten Commandments*, 2018)

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God. The Third Commandment is less about how we speak the name and more about how we tarnish God’s reputation when we claim to represent God and then commit ungodly acts.

And in terms of keeping the Sabbath holy, “the Sabbath is not presented as a day of worship, but rather as a day of cessation blessed by God’s own rest. Rest is written into the very nature of things. In encountering the Creator on the Sabbath, Israel could hope to recover a right relationship with the created order.” (W. Sibley Towner, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2)

Commandments five through ten give direction on maintaining right relationships with one another. I especially appreciated this perspective from another contemporary theologian: “Contrary to some forms of evangelical Christianity, one cannot love God without also loving one’s neighbor; and contrary

to some forms of theological liberalism and the social gospel, one cannot properly love one's neighbor unless that love is rooted in one's love of God." (George W. Stroup, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2)

Honoring father and mother may be the most difficult of all our *neighbor-centered* relationships. For those who have suffered abuse at the hands of their parents, it is helpful to see the larger picture. Honoring where you came from, the source of your life, and the fact that you would not exist without them may be the healthiest way to honor your father and mother.

The commandments at the end of the list - against murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, and coveting what belongs to your neighbor - may seem like private issues between two individuals, and therefore not a threat to community. But there is a ripple effect that extends far and wide, changing our relationship with God and with everyone in our path.

Finally, we know that Jesus summarized the commandments, boiled them down to the two greatest commandments, and framed them in a positive light, to answer a timeless and unceasing question, WHAT SHALL WE DO? You shall

love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as ourselves.

May we obey God's commandments to the glory of God!

AMEN.