

FULL CIRCLE

Exodus 20:16-21

Sixth Wednesday in Lent

March 21, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Old Testament lesson is from Exodus, chapter 20, verses 16 through 21. More than simply the conclusion to the Ten Commandments, this reading comes full circle and brings us back around to the First Commandment. Please stand as you are able for the Old Testament lesson. From Exodus 20, beginning at verse 16, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁶ "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷ "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

¹⁸ Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." ²⁰ Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." ²¹ The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

With the Eighth Commandment, we begin to see that the Ten Commandments return to where they started. We will see in a moment that the Ninth and Tenth Commandments bring us right back to the First Commandment. And the Eighth Commandment gets us going in that direction, because it returns us to the Second Commandment.

Imagine that the Ten Commandments look like a partially cooked spaghetti noodle. Or you can imagine one of those big long foam noodles that kids and bad swimmers like me use in the pool. The noodle is mostly firm, but you can bend it. When you hold it up by one end and just let it hang, it looks straight, but it's bendable, so you take the bottom end of it and bend it up to the top, but instead of making a circle, you make a tear drop shape. So the point where the beginning and end meet at the top, that's where the Ninth and Tenth Commandments return to the First Commandment. And this section a little further down where the beginning and end don't quite touch each other, but they're pretty close, and they have the same shape, but they just go in different directions, that's the Second Commandment and the Eighth Commandment.

I'll explain, and hopefully this will make sense, because I was really tired when I wrote this. The Second Commandment has to do with misusing God's Name, while the Eighth Commandment has to do with misusing our neighbor's name. To try to put a fine point on it, the Second Commandment includes lying or bearing false witness about God, while the Eighth Commandment includes lying or bearing false witness against our neighbor. So the Second and

Eighth Commandments both have to do with our words. The difference is that the Second Commandment forbids word sins against God, while the Eighth Commandment forbids word sins against our neighbor.

And since these commandments are so related, they also protect similar gifts. Remember, we've been noting how each commandment prohibits certain sins and protects certain gifts. The Second Commandment, by prohibiting the vain use of God's Name, protects the gift of God's Name, so that we might know him truthfully and call upon the one true God in every time of need. This is how we are commanded to use God's Name. So as the Second Commandment protects the divine Name, so the Eighth Commandment protects all human names.

First and foremost, the Eighth Commandment protects our neighbor's name. And by this we mean his honor and reputation. That's what we mean when we speak of a "good name." When we bear false witness against our neighbor—and remember: your neighbor in this case is whoever you are speaking of, whether they live in the house next door or in a van down by the river. When we bear false witness against our neighbor, we damage his name. We bring his honor and reputation into disgrace. This can be even more damaging than sins against his property, because property is easily restored; a good name is much more difficult. Damaging our neighbor's good name can make it difficult for him to find a job, or friends, or a spouse, or all sorts of good things. These effects can be devastating.

So the Eighth Commandment protects our neighbor's gift of a good name, but it also protects our good name. When we say enough things that aren't true, people start to notice, and they stop trusting the things we say. So we eventually bring our own reputations into disgrace. So we should be honest and charitable for our own sakes as well. It's kind of a selfish reason to do good, but it works. And it is actually important to preserve our own good names, because sometimes we might actually have something good or important to say, and we want people to believe it. It's kind of like the fable of the boy who cried "wolf." At first there was no "wolf," so people stopped believing him. And when the wolf came, and the cry was actually true, there was no help, because he had ruined his own name. So the Eighth Commandment protects our neighbor's good name, and it also protects our own. And this is good.

In the *Large Catechism*, which is kind of like the *Small Catechism*, but longer, Martin Luther identifies three areas in which this commandment applies. First, he mentions the legal courts. This is where we need honest judges, lawyers, and witnesses. And this is the part of the sermon where we refrain from making lawyer jokes. I actually know some very honest lawyers. They're just not very good. Oh, was that a lawyer joke? Sorry.

The wording of the commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness," makes us think of a courtroom. In order for the system to work, we need people to speak the truth when it is required of them. This also applies to any legal statement you make, like your tax returns. Fudging the numbers a little bit is not only a violation of the Seventh Commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," it is also a violation of the Eighth.

The second area Luther applies this commandment to is the Church when godly and faithful teachers are accused of heresy. This was especially applicable during the Reformation, when the Roman Catholic opponents of the Reformation threw all sorts of insults and accusations at the reformers. But it still applies today when we talk about other confessions of the Christian faith. We certainly recognize that different church bodies have different understandings of

some doctrines, and it's not wrong for us to debate with each other. That's actually a good thing and should be encouraged. But we must keep our conversation civil and constructive, and we must not paint our opponents as worse than they really are.

And the third area Luther applies this commandment to is probably the most important. It's also the area in which we violate the commandment most often. I'm talking about the ordinary conversations we have concerning our neighbors. This is where the specific sins of gossip and slander typically occur. Now I know we all love some juicy gossip. I mean, did you hear about Bill? I heard that he gossips, like, all the time. Stuff like that doesn't really need to be repeated.

I suppose the reason we enjoy gossip so much is because it makes us feel better about ourselves. Whether it's the gossip you share over coffee with a friend or the celebrity gossip you see in the supermarket checkout line, it feeds our egos. And there's something really sick about this, that our negative opinions of other people make us feel better about ourselves. We actually use gossip to assuage our guilty consciences. Our consciences accuse us about this or that sin, but at least we're not as bad as so and so. So we use gossip to silence our guilty consciences.

We need to practice a better way of handling gossip. First, when you become aware of another person's sin, you must not speak of it to people who do not need to know it. If you see a person committing a crime, it is good and just to call the police. If you don't have any proof, or if you can't personally testify to the crime, then you can't do anything. It's just hearsay, and you let it go. If it's a non-criminal sin, and you can sufficiently prove it, then you should rebuke the person. If it was a fairly private sin—like you observe one person saying a hateful thing to another person, you should rebuke the offender in the presence of the person offended, but the rebuke must not exceed that. However private or public the particular sin is, that is how private or public the rebuke should be. This way, everyone who knows about the sin knows about the rebuke, and everyone who doesn't need to know about the sin, never hears about it. It ends there, and you never speak of it again.

And we should especially apply this practice of rebuking to the sin of gossip. When you hear gossip, you should rebuke it openly and immediately in front of all the people who heard it. This way, the offender will be rebuked, and everyone who hears it will recognize it as gossip and be ashamed to spread it any further.

Now the word "rebuke" sounds kind of harsh. But you don't actually have to be harsh in your rebuke. You can be clear and gentle about it, saying, "Bill, that kind of sounds like gossip. I am also very tempted to spread it around, but for the sake of Sally's good name, we probably shouldn't."

And, if you want, you can even be a little bit clever about it. I heard this advice from another pastor, and I think it's pretty good. Whenever a "concerned parishioner" came to him to report a sin of someone else that they thought the pastor should be aware of, his response was, "Oh, that's interesting. What did they say when you confronted them about it?" And they might say, "But that's the pastor's job." Actually, it's not. First, it is the job of the person who first becomes aware of the sin. And then, only if they refuse to repent, should the pastor get involved. And if they repent, which is the goal, neither the pastor nor anyone else ever needs to hear a word of it.

I hope this rebuke thing makes sense. If not, read Matthew 18(:15-20). Jesus deals with it there. And read the *Large Catechism* on the Eighth Commandment too. Luther does an excellent job explaining the whole thing.

So any time we speak negatively of another person without having a just reason to do so, we sin against the Eighth Commandment, and we damage our neighbor's good name.

Now the Ninth and Tenth Commandments—the commandments against coveting: These commandments are very similar and are often treated as one. They also get us all the way back to the First Commandment.

The only difference between the Ninth and Tenth Commandments is that the Ninth has to do with our neighbor's property, while the Tenth has to do with our neighbor's living things.

The Ninth Commandment forbids coveting our neighbor's house, while the Tenth has to do with the people and animals in his life, like his wife, servants, and livestock.

To covet is to desire to have what your neighbor has, and for your neighbor to not have it anymore. And that second part is the key. It's the part where your neighbor doesn't get to have it anymore that is the problem.

Concerning the Ninth Commandment, it's okay to notice your neighbor's new lawnmower and think, "Hey, that would make mowing the lawn so much easier this summer," just so long as you go down to the hardware store and buy your own. It is not okay to swindle your neighbor out of his.

And concerning the Tenth Commandment, it's okay, when you notice that your neighbor has a beautiful wife, for you to want a beautiful wife too, just so long as you don't try to take his. You have to find one who isn't taken yet. And for women, the same applies to your neighbor's handsome husband.

It's also okay, when you meet Peter on Sunday—that is, if you are deemed healthy enough to pass his mama's standards—it's okay to say, "Oh, I want a baby too," just so long as you don't try to take mine. You and I would have a serious problem.

In the *Small Catechism*, Luther also applies this commandment to coveting our neighbor's servants and livestock. Most of us don't have any servants or livestock, so the explanation seems a bit archaic. But we can easily apply the thing about servants to our neighbor's employees. When you see that a particular business has found some really great workers, it's not really okay to try to hire them all away.

And we can apply the livestock thing to other pets or animals. If you really like your neighbor's dog or horse, you must not entice them away.

So whether you admire your neighbor's spouse, children, employees, or animals, we must always encourage them to stay with our neighbor and fulfill their duty to our neighbor.

So, as these two final commandments apply to our neighbors around us, we keep them when we help our neighbors maintain possession of all their property, people, and animals. This way, our admiration of what belongs to our neighbor does not cause harm to our neighbor.

And as these two commandments relate to God, they are identical to the First Commandment, because coveting amounts to idolatry. Let me explain: when you covet something or someone, you believe that obtaining it will satisfy you, and you make that particular person or thing your god.

Several weeks ago, when we considered the First Commandment, we noted that we break the First Commandment in subtle ways when we make certain things or people the highest priority in our lives. We end up putting them in the place of God, and this amounts to idolatry. It's the same as carving a statue and worshipping it, believing that statue will provide for our wants and needs. We believe that obtaining the perfect spouse, the perfect children, or the coolest pickup truck will satisfy our highest desires. So we seek after those things as if they are gods. Now it's not wrong to seek after these things. And it's not wrong to enjoy them. We should enjoy good things, because every good thing is a gift from God. The point is that, as we enjoy certain people and things, we recognize that they are creatures and creations of the Creator, and we keep the Creator as our God. So when we seek and obtain good things, we recognize them as gifts from the Almighty Creator, and we say, "Thanks be to God!"

And so the great gift that the Ninth and Tenth Commandments protect is God's gift of contentment. We recognize all the wonderful people and things in our lives as God's gifts, and we confess that he has given us everything we need for this life. So we rejoice in the good gifts he has given to us, and, instead of coveting, we rejoice that he has also given good gifts to our neighbor.

And so we see that the Ninth and Ten Commandments bring us right back to where we started in the First Commandment. The one true God has become our God and we are to have no other gods before him.

So it's fitting, as the end is tied back to the beginning, that Luther's explanations in the *Small Catechism* would have a consistent pattern that ties them all back to the First Commandment. The meaning to the First Commandment was, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." And I hope you noticed, when we read the meanings to all the other commandments, that every single one of them begins with the words, "We should fear and love God so that ..." This is part of the subtle genius of the *Small Catechism*—that our obedience to the commandments is based on fear and love.

We love because God has first loved us (1 John 4:19). That is, God has made himself to be our God through the forgiving work of Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. He has loved us by a great act of love, and so we love him in return. But our love for God is not really manifested in actions directed back toward God. Rather, it is manifested in actions directed out toward our neighbors. This is because God doesn't need anything from us, but our neighbor does. And God loves our neighbors too, so he desires for good things to be done for them. The idea is that, instead of doing good works for God, we pay it forward to our neighbors around us, because they are the ones who need it. So we fear and love God, and this manifests itself in works of love toward our neighbor.

And we might get hung up on this word "fear" too. In our vocabulary, we generally think of fear as a bad thing. We think of it in terms of terror. And to those who disbelieve, God is nothing but terrifying. But to those of us who believe, that terror is transformed into respect, and that is primarily what we mean when we talk about fearing God. It's like a child who fears the great power and wisdom of his or her parents. Children marvel at the great things mom and dad can do, but they're not terrified, because they know mom and dad are on their side. They will not use this power to destroy them.

FULL CIRCLE (Exodus 20:16-21)

My favorite illustration for this, and some of you might already know what I'm going to say here, is the lion Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. C.S. Lewis wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* to teach the Christian faith, and the lion Aslan is the metaphor for Jesus. If you've never read the books, you absolutely should, even if you think you're too old for them. At first when the Pevensie children hear of the great lion, they are terrified. But eventually they meet him, and they learn that he is not against them but for them. And suddenly this great terror is turned into respect and a powerful trust because they come to know that the greatest power in all of Narnia will do anything to protect and save them.

And so we, when we realize that the one true God—the greatest power in all the universe—is not against us but for us, we have the greatest confidence in his salvation. He stopped at nothing to save us. He did not even spare his own Son.

What shall we say then to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all good things? ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:31-32, 35, 37-39)

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" No one. So we "fear, love, and trust in God above all things." Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.