

OLD COMMANDMENTS; NEW CIRCUMSTANCES

Exodus 20:1-17

Second Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

June 14, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon text comes from the second book of Moses, commonly known as *Exodus*, chapter 20, verses 1 through 17. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Exodus 20, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ And God spoke all these words, saying,

² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³ "You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹² "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ "You shall not murder.

¹⁴ "You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ "You shall not steal.

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."

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.

You don't want to hear about the coronavirus, and I don't want to talk about it. It's one of those things that we've just heard so much about that we're annoyed by it. I get it. To make matters worse, it quickly became a political issue, which means that two opposing sides adopted completely different viewpoints and they've been shouting past each other for the last three months. It's kind of annoying.

But I want to approach it from a different angle. I'm not going to address it in terms of politics or policy. I want to think about it biblically. So my goal is to speak to individual hearts. Think of it in terms of God, you, and your neighbor whom you are called to love.

I originally intended to do a three part series on this, but then I remembered that I don't want to talk about the coronavirus, and you don't want to listen to me talk about it. So if you promise to listen carefully and humbly, I'll let you off with just one sermon.

I especially want to think of it in terms of the Ten Commandments. So this isn't so much a sermon about pandemics as it is a sermon on the Ten Commandments. Our current pandemic will simply provide a case study to look at the way we apply the Ten Commandments.

Part of the reason why we're doing this is because every Christian should be trained to use the Ten Commandments in their daily lives. The Ten Commandments provide a framework for our behavior, and I hope to give you an example of how to apply the Ten Commandments.

When we talk about the Ten Commandments, we're really not talking about just ten commands. People who like to count say there are 613 commandments in the five books of Moses—that would be the first five books of the Bible—1,050 in the New Testament, and I couldn't find anyone who wanted to count up the commandments in the other thirty-four books of the Old Testament. In short, there are a whole lot more than ten. The actual number probably exceeds 2,000. But the Ten Commandments still provide a framework for all of them. I'll give you a few examples:

The Third Commandment is, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (20:8). This has to do with worship, so we include under this commandment the verse from Hebrews that says, "Do not neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some" (Heb. 10:25).

The Fourth Commandment is, "Honor your father and your mother" (20:12). This has to do with submission to authorities, so we include the commandment from Romans, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1).

The Fifth Commandment is, "You shall not murder" (20:13). And we follow Jesus' lead when he expands this commandment by saying, "**But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment**" (Matt. 5:22).

The Sixth Commandment is, "You shall not commit adultery" (20:14). And again we follow Jesus when he says, "**But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart**" (Matt. 5:28).

And the Eighth Commandment is, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (20:16). This has to do with our words, so we include in this every commandment against deceit, gossip, slander, backbiting, hypocrisy, etc.

One of the great benefits of the Small Catechism is that it summarizes all of this very neatly. I can't recommend highly enough that all of you memorize the Small Catechism with its explanations. And I especially recommend that parents do this with their children before they begin confirmation. After all, the catechism was originally designed to be used in the home. And

in the section on the Ten Commandments, which is the first part of the catechism, the explanations pull together and summarize all of the other biblical commandments into the framework of the Ten. So when you learn the Ten Commandments, you're learning the basic principle of each commandment and how it is applied throughout the rest of Scripture. This gives us a simple framework for understanding and applying all of God's Law.

If all we learn is the Ten Commandments, without regard for the rest of the biblical commands, we are easily tempted by our sinful natures to justify ourselves. We focus on the minimum requirement of the commandment and say, "Hey, I went to church this week, I didn't murder anyone, I didn't cheat on my spouse, and I didn't steal anything, I must be pretty good." This is the minimalist view to the commandments. But the explanations from the catechism give us the maximalist view. They expand the commandments to cover all of the biblical commandments. And they don't merely state what we are prohibited from doing, but they also state what we should do. This gives us a proper framework to examine ourselves and our actions.

So it's appropriate for us to examine ourselves in light of the Ten Commandments. Then we will know what sins we need to repent of, and we will know what good works we should do to love and serve our neighbors.

Seeing the Ten Commandments this way also gives us a framework for how we respond to the different challenges life throws at us. There is nothing new under the sun, but there are many things that seem new to us. The coronavirus pandemic is one of those things. The world has faced plagues and pandemics before, but most of us have never experienced it, so it seems new to us. So it's helpful for us to take a step back and ask, "Which commandments apply to this situation? How do I love God, and how do I love my neighbor during a pandemic?"

And we can do this with pretty much everything. Years ago someone taught me to do this. In all kinds of situations, we ask, "Which commandments apply to this situation?" And the answer usually includes about three or four commandments.

So this isn't so much a sermon about pandemics, as it is a sermon on the Ten Commandments. We're simply using our current pandemic as an example for how we apply the Ten Commandments.

First, we think of the First Commandment. And I'll give you a tip. Whenever you ask yourself, "Which commandments?" the First Commandment is pretty much always the first answer. It applies to everything.

The First Commandment is, "You shall have no other gods before me" (20:3). The catechism's explanation is short and simple: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

Notice those three verbs: "Fear, love, and trust." These three verbs define what it means to have a god. There is only one true God. Let's be clear about that. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But there are practically an infinite number of things that we might put in the place of God. Whatever we fear, love, and trust above anything else, that is our god. Now that doesn't mean that everything we fear, love, or trust is necessarily in the place of God, but whatever we "fear, love, or trust ... *above all things*." Children can fear being disciplined by their parents. Husbands can love their wives. You can trust your car to get you from point A to point B. These are all good. But when we start to fear, love, or trust something *more* than we fear, love, or trust God, we have a problem.

So how does the First Commandment apply to a pandemic? Well, if we fear a virus more than we fear God, we have a problem. It's not just positive things that can become gods for us. It

can be negative things as well. Things we hate or fear can take the place of God in our hearts. This is double-sad, because it's not very enjoyable to have a harsh god, and it's also a sin.

Now this doesn't mean we shouldn't be concerned about a virus. We can even fear it. There are many things in the world worth being afraid of. But when that fear surpasses our fear of God, we have a problem. You are in Christ; there is nothing the world can take from you that God will not give back in the resurrection of the dead.

Another way we might violate the First Commandment is when we put government in the place of God. And this happens both on the left and on the right. Who do we look to first for help? Where do we expect deliverance to come from? I'll give you a diagnostic question. And if you answer this question honestly, it will reveal to you whether or not government has taken the place of God in your life. *When you think about the pandemic—or any other problem for that matter—what does your mind do first? Do you think about public policy, or do you pray? Which one of those happens first?* If your go-to response is public policy, you have a First Commandment problem. Government is good. God instituted government. He uses good government to promote justice, peace, and order in the world. But government cannot solve all of our problems, and it should not be the first call for Christians. Prayer should always come first.

The Third and Fifth Commandments are also at play during the pandemic. We'll deal with these together.

The Third Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." This has to do with worship, so we include the commandment from Hebrews that says, "Do not neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some" (Heb. 10:25). It is necessary for Christians to meet together for worship.

But there is a tension with the Fifth Commandment. The Fifth Commandment is, "You shall not murder." And the catechism teaches the fuller meaning of this commandment by saying, "We should fear and love God so that we do our neighbor no bodily harm nor cause him any suffering, but help and befriend him in every need." It's not just ending a person's life that is sinful, but causing them any bodily harm. It is necessary for us to protect our neighbor's body.

So when we have a situation where we may cause bodily harm to another person by gathering in person, we have a tension. And let me be clear: it's not a contradiction between the commandments. Both commandments are true and good. Rather, it's a tension between the applications of the commandments. So it's a case where we need to exercise wisdom in how we might best keep both commandments.

Now, I was not involved in the decision back in March to suspend services, but I suspect the Fifth Commandment was part of the reasoning. And the Third Commandment is why I decided to start a live stream. It would not be right to leave you with nothing. Even though you could easily find a better preacher somewhere on the internet, it was important to have something that binds us together as a congregation. And I think most of you knew that instinctively. I didn't have to tell you to watch our live stream instead of looking for a better one. I know some of you watched others in addition to ours, and that's great. There's nothing wrong with extra church. But you had a natural Christian desire to be a member of this congregation and be united with your fellow members of this congregation.

And both the Third and the Fifth Commandment are why we are continuing the live stream, even after we resumed services in person. If the Third Commandment were our only concern, there would be no live stream. We would just say, "Come to church." But the health of your bodies matters. We need to protect them.

And you have the responsibility, under the Fifth Commandment, to protect your own bodies too. We do not have the right to be irresponsible with our bodies. That's because our bodies are not our own. They belong to God. He created us, and he redeemed us through Christ. Our bodies—our lives—are not our own property; they belong to God. We do not have the right to be irresponsible with them. If a person risks their life for another person, that is a virtuous thing. But if a person risks their life simply because they want to, and they don't really care if they live or die, that is sin. If attending church in person is a risk to your health or the health of someone you come in contact with, it is right to stay home and participate via the live stream. That's what it's for. You are not sinning.

I should also tell you what the live stream is not for. It's not for watching church in your pajamas. If that's the only reason you're at home, that's not a very good reason. I'm glad you're watching, but you can do better. It's really an issue of purpose. If your purpose for being at home is to protect you or someone you come in contact with, that's good. If your purpose for being at home is laziness, that's not good. I know everyone's circumstances are different, so I'll let you sort through that. I simply want you to sort through it using the Ten Commandments.

The last commandment that I want to consider during this pandemic is the Eighth. This is the one that governs the way we use our words in respect to our neighbors. And this is the one that really concerns me.

I'd probably be less concerned if I stayed off Facebook. But then I wouldn't know just how badly this needs to be addressed. Social media lends itself to insults, jokes at other people's expense, and putting the least charitable construction on our opponents. It's just easier to be mean when you're separated from another person by a screen. I'm kind of surprised sometimes by the things I see people post on Facebook, because I don't think they would say those things if the other person were standing right in front of them, especially if they knew their pastor was listening. But then sometimes I see it in person too, and I realize it's not just a Facebook thing.

We're just not very good at listening to one another. We don't respect people who think differently than we do. This seems to be an especially great problem in our current society. Or maybe this has always been a problem in the world, and I just happen to be living now. But we need to do better.

I want you to think about this: When you debate a person, what are you trying to accomplish? Are you trying to defeat them? Are you trying to persuade them? Are you trying to learn? The default position of our sinful nature is to destroy our opponents. This is also reinforced by all the bad examples we see on our screens. Whether it's a debate between political candidates or talking heads on a talk show, their goal is to destroy their opponents in the most entertaining way possible. This may be an effective way to entertain the viewers at home or build their base, but it does nothing to help their opponents, they don't learn anything, and it's just not very nice, so it's unlikely to persuade anyone on the other side.

I actually think it's healthy and good for people to debate. Sometimes it can even be fun, especially if both sides do it respectfully and with the common goal of being united in the truth. Our goals should be to persuade and learn, not to defeat or destroy. Think of debate as an act of love for your debate partner.

The most important thing we can do in any debate is listen. I have a little exercise I do sometimes when I find myself in a debate. I don't remember who, but someone probably taught me this. After the debate, when I'm all by myself, I try to argue for my opponent's position. And often I do it out loud. If I can't put myself in their shoes and make a persuasive argument for

their side, it means I wasn't listening. Then I have to go back, apologize, and ask them to tell me again, this time without me arguing against them. It's really a check on myself to make sure I listened fairly.

If I'm wrong, and I don't listen, I'm not going to be persuaded to the truth. Humility is one of the keys to knowledge. If we don't allow for the possibility that we might be wrong, we are rarely going to learn anything, and we are sentencing ourselves to ignorance. Humility is one of the keys to knowledge.

On the other hand, if I'm right, and I don't listen, I'm not going to be able to persuade my opponent, because I don't understand how they think. Even if your opponent is wrong, the best thing you can do is listen, because this shows that you respect them enough to listen, which will make them more likely to listen to you, and it gives you an opportunity to see where the error is in their logic. Then you can go after that one point instead of trying to destroy everything.

Sins of the tongue are an especially great danger for Christians. Debating poorly is not the only problem. We are also prone to gossip, slander, and deceit. The easiest way to destroy a congregation is through sins of the tongue. The worst kind is when we speak wrongly about God. That's false doctrine, and it's covered under the Second Commandment. But the second worst kind is when we speak wrongly about one another, especially through gossip and slander. This is condemned by the Eighth commandment. Gossip and slander usually occur when a person doesn't have the love or courage to speak to a person directly. This quickly creates hostile divisions within a congregation.

The catechism explains the Eighth Commandment like this: "We should fear and love God so that we do not deceitfully lie about, betray, backbite nor slander our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and put the most charitable construction on all that he does." Notice how high the catechism sets the bar for our words. Do we defend our neighbors? Do we speak well of them? Do we grant them the most charitable construction? How about those with whom we disagree? Do we grant them the most charitable construction? Or do we impose the worst construction on them, because that makes it easier to destroy them? The tongue is the hardest part of our bodies to control, and it is also the most destructive (Jam. 3:5-8).

We must all examine ourselves in light of the Ten Commandments. What did you learn about yourself during this sermon? If we have handled God's Word rightly, we should all have learned something painful about ourselves. What sins have we discovered in our own hearts? Have we placed something besides God in his place? Have we neglected His Word and the importance of worshipping with the other members of this congregation? Have we been irresponsible with our bodies or with our neighbor's body? Have we disrespected or harmed our neighbors with our words? I know there are some yeses in there. So what do we do now?

In a moment we'll talk about forgiveness. But we also need to state the obvious: *Stop it. Just stop breaking the commandments.* It won't earn you any credit with God. But for the sake of your neighbor, for the sake of our congregation, and for the sake of a well-ordered society, just stop it. We all need to be better.

And now regarding forgiveness. If you have learned something painful about yourself, if you have become aware of sin in your life, this next part is for you. On the other hand, if you think you're doing pretty well, if nothing in this sermon pricked your conscience, you should stop listening now, because this next part is not for you.

Repent. Confess your sin. Look to Jesus who was crucified for your sin. The real sight of the cross is quite ugly. And the reason it is ugly is because those very sins that prick your conscience

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were laid on Christ. Jesus' pain was real. The blood stained earth beneath the cross was real. His death was real. That is because our sins are real. If you want to have hypothetical sins, where you simply confess that you are by nature sinful and unclean and that you have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, but you don't want to give names to those sins, then you have a hypothetical savior. But if you have real sins, if you have sins with names, if your sins trouble your conscience, then you have a real Savior with real flesh, real blood, real death, real forgiveness, and real life. Jesus died to forgive our idolatry. Jesus died to forgive our vain attitude toward worship. Jesus died for the carelessness we have for our neighbors. Jesus died for all the sins of our tongues. Jesus died for these sins and all the other sins with names. Repent. Confess your sin. Look to Jesus who was crucified for your sin.

Before we even confess our sins, God promises what the outcome will be. He promises forgiveness, because the cost of forgiveness has already been paid. Flee for refuge to his infinite mercy. Amen.

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