

“Ten Commandments” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey October 12, 2008
Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA)

TEXT: Exodus 1:1-17 Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You 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. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; 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. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.' Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.' Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

I recently paged through a book, actually more of a treatise, on why the church has so thoroughly failed young adults. *Disillusionment* and *disappointment* are favorite words in the author's argument. The author asks, with more cynicism than innocence, "What does going to church every Sunday really have to do with anything?"

Although the context is a little different, the question reminds me of a meeting I was at years ago, when a woman actually berated a minister who served on the school board. She began to blame the church for the problems that her daughter faced and the problems that teenagers were encountering in our society. She stated that the problems of teenagers could be traced directly to the church which was no longer teaching "the basics." Her strongest and most self-evident point was that children were no longer required to memorize the Ten Commandments. Of course, it turns out that, when challenged, she could not recite them herself.

While I sympathize with frustrations and fears about our teens, I think it is a mistake to

attribute magical qualities to the Ten Commandments – or to the Church. They are both means to an end, never an end in themselves.

The Ten Commandments are actually listed in only two places in the Bible - Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. They came out of a need for guidance, a culture that knew nothing about individualism, as we understand it.

Do any of you remember a movie called “The Shawshank Redemption”? It is a prison escape movie, with a difference. In it an elderly inmate called Brooks Hatlen is released after spending almost his entire life behind bars. The problem is that after 50 years behind bars, he has become “institutionalized”. He does not feel safe anymore; there is no structure to his life. Instead of committing a crime so that he can go back to prison where he feels safe, he commits suicide because he cannot cope with life on the outside.

Most people who have spent any amount of time in prison, or in any highly structured environment, do have a hard time adjusting, partially because they are not accustomed to thinking for themselves, or making anything but the smallest of decisions.

The Hebrew people had been slaves for generations. They may have been able to decide what to cook for supper or whom to marry or what to call their children, but most of life was controlled or regimented by the work of making bricks and chipping out stone for the Egyptians’ building projects, their taskmasters ruled their lives and made most decisions for them. Now, in their freedom seeking a renewed sense of identity and purpose, they needed guidelines to unite them and regulations to define what was and was not acceptable within this new community headed for the promised land.

The Ten Commandments, and the rest of “the law” were part of this re-orientation. The first 4 commandment answered the question, How am I to respond to the God who first loved me? And, the second 6 answered: how shall I love my neighbor as myself? In the first commandments, God says, basically, “I’m God -- you’re not.” In The next six, God says, “it’s not about you, it’s about all of you together; here’s how.”

And then Jesus came and summed up the commandments even more succinctly: " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul and with all of your mind. This is the greatest and the second is like it, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' " (Matthew 22:35-40) It was as if he were channeling The prophet Jeremiah when God said: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." (Jer 31:31-33)

Do the Commandments have relevance today? I think it is a matter of those expectations I referred to earlier. If your expectations in life are unreal, your disappointments will be huge. If, in starting a family, your expectation is that you will enjoy selfless devotion to kids and from kids, and a constant romance of support and togetherness, watch out!

If your expectation for church is the thrill of one euphoric experience after another, you’ll probably not hang around too long. If you think it will fix all your problems and the

problems of your kids as well, you will suffer the disgust of the mother lambasting the school board member. If, on the other hand, you see the church of Jesus Christ as a growing garden, full of both sweet corn and manure, both holiness and holy mess, you might find an overview of encouragement. You might uncover a sense of adventure and possibility, a community where we have a realistic shot at being changed, transformed through the joys and sorrows, the rigors and delights, of the shared community.

Similarly, if you can forget about that early Sunday School teacher who warned that "the commandments came on a stone tablet: they can never be bent, only broken," then we might appreciate them more as ethical standards, a message that to be human is to be responsible. If you let go of the negativity, they might become navigational aids in the sea of life. After all, navigation has been a necessary component of human community since the dawn of civilization. At sea the position of the stars and planets on any particular night helps fix a vessel's position. Closer to shore there are landmarks, such as a jetty, a lighthouse, an inland mountain peak. In a very real way such directional signs are a source of liberation; they free us from following erroneous ways and assist us in making wise decisions in the route our life takes.

Some sort of standards today might be useful. It's not often that most Americans are feeling the same thing at the same time, mostly talking about the same thing, and all worrying about the same thing. There's anger, but underneath the anger, there is a deeper level of *fear* in America right now. The collapse of Wall Street, the deepening economic recession and the clear threat of another depression now looming have become the overriding focus of the upcoming election – too many seem to have abandoned the principles of integrity and honesty and fairness, and replaced them with the goal of winning, even it means lying and cheating and stealing. We live in a world that is caught in a whirlpool of change and concern for the have-nots and helpless people of our society has been replaced with our own selfish desires "to make it" no matter what it costs.

What does the Bible say about all the issues now being raised? What does our theology tell us about money and possessions, wealth and power, credit and responsible financial choices, economic values vs. family values, lifestyle and stewardship, generosity and justice, and both personal and social responsibility?

Remember the Ten Commandments. Remember Jesus saying: "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul and with all of your mind. This is the greatest and the second is like it, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

With such commandments as navigational aids, perhaps there are creative opportunities and new solutions that could come out of all of this: like the possibilities of mutual aid, congregational and community credit unions, and new cooperative strategies for solving problems like health care, housing, and even jobs.

God is still in this mix, but we need some strategies, some guidance to rely upon. Our financial tumble has been at least in part due to a lack of rules, a lack of oversight, and mostly, a lack of clear paths and shared destination. Our financial bailout is running into

trouble not only from a lack of clarity and accountability, but also because the government did not consider all the major players. The government forgot that we have a globalized financial system in which a crisis that began with Florida condos and California mansions now causes monetary catastrophe in Iceland and financial danger around the globe. We're all in this together, and we need a shared solution.

Jesus based his life on the politics of a new age. He foresaw a new kind of kingdom that not only cares for the poor, but is willing to be poor; a kingdom that not only refuses to participate in the world's violence but is willing to die at the hands of a violent world. He offered a way to deal with offenders, by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence, by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money, by sharing it. He gave them a new way to deal with problems of leadership, by drawing on the gift of every member, even the most humble. He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society, by building a new order, not remaking the old. He gave them a new pattern of relationships in which we learn to accept and value one another, no matter our status or gender or job.

Some of the beauty and significance of church remains a mystery. Why do certain people would bother to love others, forgive others, and serve others? Why some people gather to try to understand and live into a St. Francis kind of life that asks us to seek to understand more than to be understood, to console more than be consoled, seek hope over despair and faith over doubt? Why do some of us walk into this call willingly? It is beyond common comprehension. But Church reminds that the impossible is possible. Jesus rendering of the Ten Commandments makes it simple. The problem is, simple is not easy.

May God bless our journey.