

THE ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT!



EXODUS 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
PSALM 19
PHILIPPIANS 3:4b-14
MATTHEW 21:33-46

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Proper 22; Year A
October 8, 2017

THE ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT!
(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)
[Footnote citations are unavailable for this sermon.]

The Hillbilly Ten Commandments:

- 1. Ain't but one God.***
- 2. Honor yer Ma and Pa.***
- 3. No tellin' tales or gossin'.***
- 4. Git yer hide to Sunday meetin'. Glad you got the memo!***
- 5. Ain't nothin' come before the Lord.***
- 6. No foolin' with another fellers gal.***
- 7. (And, my favorite), No killin', 'cept fer critters.***
- 8. Quit yer foul mouthin'.***
- 9. No swipin' yer kin folks stuff.***
- 10. Don't be hankerin' for it neither.***

I think I needed a drumroll! You know, until I read those gems of wit and wisdom I had never thought of the Ten Commandments in terms of the Top Ten list we used to hear on the David Letterman Show.

An empty frame. For years it was hanging in the lobby of the courthouse in Pulaski County, Kentucky. It was a shell, blank and void and looked a might ridiculous in many respects. But, this picture frame portraying nothing but empty space was not left in place as a joke. It was considered no laughing matter, but revealed an underlying deep and dark anger, a simmering, boiling frustration about what was believed needed to be left alone and should still be prominently displayed, secure in its rightful place. The empty frame remained intentionally hung as a testimonial to something that was thought by many to be now glaringly missing, a witness to something that had been cavalierly taken away, clandestinely removed by heartless, Godless, irreverently inspired socialistic, communistic secular humanists. For you see, this space was once the home of a

depiction of the Ten Commandments and this frame reminded observers of what was reserved for this particular spot and indeed, used to be housed in this sacred space. In 2001 a United States district court judge ordered that the display be removed, a decision that would be upheld by a federal appeals court in 2003. It was the determination of the courts that the posting of the Ten Commandments in the courthouse violated the First Amendment that forbids Congress from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion.” Unceremoniously, the Commandments were taken down by order of the court. To many it was the ultimate disrespect of the assumed Judeo-Christian values that made America great. The frame, however, remained, a constant reminder of the erosion of sacred principles long held dear along with what was perceived to be the depraved secularization of a country that we all know full well in reality was mythologically founded as a Christian nation. Of course, do not tell that to those accused of witchcraft, executed as witches at Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, a direct result of an irrationally driven mass hysteria. But, I digress; I often do! Many Kentuckians rallied to the cause, zealots rising to fight the insidious infidels who clearly were given over to their moral depravity and reprobate minds. They stridently fought the ruling, taking their arguments all the way to the Supreme Court of the land. Darrell BeShears, the judge-executive of Pulaski County, traveled to Washington with 200 other faithful zealots to witness the proceedings. More than anything else, BeShears purpose in the trip was to see to it that the frame was refilled, returning the Ten Commandments to its prominent and proper place. As we are all acutely aware, there has been no lack of intensity around this issue in recent years, lines drawn in the sand by sincere persons on both sides of the equation. “It’s about our heritage; It’s about our history” so said Christian radio owner David Carr to the Lexington Herald-Leader, invoking the familiar rallying cry of those who support the Rebel flag and

the ubiquitous Confederate statuary that dots the South and, strangely and ironically enough, even beyond. He further declared, “It’s about the future of our children.”

Ironically, arguments heard about displaying the Ten Commandments in the courthouse of McCreary County, Kentucky, a different case than the one in Pulaski County, were ironically heard directly beneath a display of the Ten Commandments that for years has adorned the Supreme Court of the United States in Washington (reported by James Carroll, Louisville, Kentucky *Courier-Journal*). How is that for the ultimate irony? Matthew Staver, representing McCreary County, said that Kentucky’s display was designed to credit the Ten Commandments’ influence in the development of civil law, not to endorse religion. “There’s no question the Ten Commandments have influenced our legislative law,” he said. This in and of itself speaks to the complexity of the issue.

And, of course we all know where this raging issue has gotten much of its momentum, if not its very origin. According to the magazine *Christianity Today*, in its March 6, 2000 issue, the move to post the Ten Commandments got its start in 1995 with the case of then Judge Roy Moore of Alabama, the same individual now running for Senate in that state, who fought to keep a copy of the Decalogue, a pseudonym for the Ten Commandments—“Deca” meaning ten—on his courtroom wall. You may remember the intensive, emotionally charged debates in that recent history. Moore suddenly found himself with much time to travel the country doing his Ten Commandments road show because he was fired for defying a court order, directly disobeying a directive that he remove the supersized granite monument of the Commandments from the building. Eventually, it was forcibly removed to the tune of much weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, an emotionally infused religious orgy

that truly smacked of idolatry, i.e. the worship of idols. It was bizarre in every way imaginable, a strange spectacle indeed.

Finally, in Ringgold, Georgia, a city of about 2000 persons near the Tennessee border, the town erected a new display in response to the now infamous September 11, 2001 attacks. The display consisted of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and, here we go again, an empty picture frame. I do believe we have a theme developing here! According to city council person Bill McMillon, the empty frame "is for those who believe in nothing." Well, that covered it. Kind of reminded me of the statue to the unknown god Paul encountered in Athens, Greece back in the day! McMillon stated that he hoped that the unanimous approval of the display would help bring back "good Christian values." Yea, good luck with that! Of course, the underlying message that the tableau conveyed was that if you "are an adherent to a non-Judeo-Christian religion," then you really "believe in nothing!" And, in this one religiously narcissistic act we get far more than a hint, a real glimpse of the prevailing proprietary arrogant and smug attitude that is hardwired into those who without compassionate sensitivity, demand that the religious symbols of their tradition be publicly affirmed no matter the sensitivities of others, interlopers on the American scene whose opinions are summarily dismissed and disregarded as irrelevant. After the display was removed by order of the court system, interested buyers could bid on the framed copy of the Ten Commandments that temporarily graced the Bartow County Courthouse. The litigators needed to raise money to pay for their legal fees incurred while trying to keep the Commandments posted. Oh, the irony of it all! You just can't make up this stuff!

The Ten Commandments are a wonderful, valuable, historic document of inestimable importance for people of the Judeo-Christian traditions. For Jews and Christians, they are bedrock,

foundational. For our purposes today imagine them as cornerstones that continue to be relevant, ordering our lives as people of faith. None of us in this room would doubt their value in any way whatsoever. Yes, we believe them to be essential, important to our faith development as individuals and as a people striving to live in beloved faith community. But sadly, the Ten Commandments have become a lightning rod, a line in the sand feeding a toxic divisiveness in society, pervading our nation with the prevailing wind of discord, cheapening these texts while doing them irreparable harm, creating a political firestorm, a climate of distrust and dis-ease, an environment of outright hostility, the divine being they represent supposedly being substituted by the demonic. Unfortunately, like most crusades, it is anything but a holy cause. And, it threatens to tear apart, even destroy the very core of our union, the most fragile, but very necessary foundation upon which this nation was actually formed and founded, and upon the guiding principles that continue to evolve in our ever expansively embracing awareness as a welcoming and inclusive, an hospitable people. Today, we explore the Ten Commandments and why they are so intrinsic to the very fiber, woven into the fabric of the people of God, and why it is not in our best interest that they be forced into the public arena of a nation that is desperately dependent on the separation of Church and State for its unique identity and is at its very best when it vigilantly keeps those hard and clear boundaries. America's well-being along with its very survival as a democratically led Republic is at stake in the way and unless these kinds of issues, these kinds of threats are addressed and resolved.

As one commentator notes, "It is not always helpful in teaching and preaching the commandments to go through them one rule at a time, as though using a check list." I wholeheartedly concur with that

sentiment, for that reduces them to nothing more than rules and regulations pulled out of context, proof texted in any willy-nilly way that any one sees fit or that suits a particular need. To be completely transparent, my goal today is not to preach the Commandments—you would be running for the exits—but rather to preach about them, their role, their place, both in history and in contemporary society. Though, the Ten appear to stand alone on their own merit, as with any part of the biblical narrative they really are open to interpretation and introspection. There is much nuance in this divine guide for living, far more than meets the eye! I want to begin our homiletical journey today by declaring that, more than a rulebook, the Ten Commandments were designed, I believe, to empower us, to make our lives full and complete as the created image of God, to give us a glimpse of what the world could and would be like if we could capture the essence of God's holy and still speaking Spirit, a paradigm for living in the shadow of God's vision of covenantal community, a global village leaning into the righteous, the holiness that only comes from God. To reduce the Ten Commandments to a pedestrian list of rules and regulations is to suck the very life from them, turning them into lifeless, wooden laws, sterilizing them as proprietary words on a page rather than windows into the very heart of God. In so doing we turn these life-giving, life-affirming avenues into idols, objects to be venerated and worshipped, obeyed as if this was all there is to living a spiritually fulfilling life within the divine arena. The Ten Commandments allow us, enable us to dance with the Divine in tangible, realized ways.

When we seek to post them in courthouses or school houses, or other public venues, or even parade them on our front lawns, we cheapen them, turning them into weaponry that only serves to divide us, bringing derision and hostility in the process, revealing a very shallow, a hollow self-righteousness. Indeed, they become nothing more than idolatrous

security blankets, road signs giving us dire warnings, ironically causing us to break Commandment number two, warning us of the danger of making an idol of any object and that would even include the words of scripture itself. Yes, the Bible can be an idol and we have all been privy to that blatant misuse. Yes, there is a very real and present temptation, an immediate danger that we transform the Ten Commandments into idols when we post them on walls.

The concern about idolatry in the Decalogue was not so much that God would be replaced by another, that was addressed in Commandment number two, “You shall have no other God’s before me.” No, the fear was, whether by accident or blatant intent, centered in even the possibility, the potential of creating, constructing, or erecting anything that might even remotely image Yahweh’s holiness. Even words present a dilemma, the chance of profaning the Holy as an image. You may or may not remember, but on that fateful day when the granite pyramid containing the Ten Commandments was forcibly removed from that Alabama courthouse, there were people bending and bowing before it, weeping and wailing, giving it a power, an aura that was more than deeply disturbing. It reminded me of many years ago in 1991 at a denominational meeting—not UCC—when a white float was brought out with the name Jesus in big, bold, gold letters. People were fanning it like a Middle Eastern movie scene of yore, bowing and bending before it. It was sickening, an insult to the very person of Jesus, a person of unquestionable character, driven by humility and service. What I am saying is that even in our best, most altruistic, most noble efforts, we can veer off course in our actions and agenda, even our unconscious motives. The power, the awe-inspiring mystery, transcendence is always found in the One who inspires our artistic or practical creations, the very One who inspired the words, what we revere as sacred writ. That, my friends, is what makes something, anything holy; that is what constitutes the sacred.

But, perhaps even more dangerous for our intents and purposes is found in the way the Ten Commandments are used, or abused, the black and white way they are often interpreted. Some would ask, “What is there to interpret, what part of ‘Thou shalt not’ do we not get, do we not understand?” Well, for starters, let’s choose a Commandment, shall we? Any Commandment? How about, we begin with the notion of idolatry that we have already kicked around a little bit in this sermon. One writer tells this story as illustration. “A college dormitory bull session once settled into a discussion on the Ten Commandments. (They must have been a rather bored lot!) The peculiar twist of this discussion, however, was neither the listing nor the meaning of this ancient moral code. It was an attempt to see if the participants could discover any commandment that some member of that group had not broken. Some of them were veterans of an armed conflict; they were certain they had killed. Others bragged about their sexual conquests, their profanity, their successful episodes of stealing, their ability to bend the truth, to enjoy their secret desires, to disregard the Sabbath and anything else that was holy. Finally, one of them, doubtless a graduate of Sunday school memory work, shouted exultantly, ‘I’ve never made a graven image!’ The group broke into a spontaneous applause. They had found their answer. At the bar of judgment regarding the making of graven images they were as innocent as lambs, as pure as the driven snow. Little did they know!” As we all know, each and every day we face the temptations of myriad idols, all competing for our attention. And, we also know full well that it is impossible to see our way through unscathed, for everything seeks to cloud our noblest attempts, our vainest efforts to always honor God above all things, devoid of competing allegiances. Our gods are many! Or, how about this one, “You shall not commit adultery, stretching this biblical

metaphor!" Seems simple enough, ask and answer! Ah, but what if we think about those who choose not to be legally married because it will make a mess of their tax situation or create other legal problems, the ramifications of which would create a crisis of irreparable harm. Or, suppose one's spouse is completely incapacitated mentally, totally unaware of any reality. Is it wrong to have a companion to share one's life for what could be a very long time? Or, try this one on for size, "You shall not kill!" It too seems cut and dried. It seems rather clear until we talk about war, just or otherwise, or when we speak about abortion, not arguing the merits or lack thereof regarding this legally protected practice. Immediately we invoke rape or incest as qualifiers, do we not? And, what about the death penalty? Or, another issue that hits close to home among senior adults is contemplating end-of-life issues related to terminal illnesses, compromised, or diminishing mental faculties. What about euthanasia? OK, let's take an even easier one. How about, "You shall not steal!" Surely, stealing is never acceptable, or is it? People who are starving do not necessarily have scruples about trying desperately to feed their families. And, who could blame them? While none of us would condone looting a store during a riot and pilfering appliances or TVs, an act we see during protests and post hurricane and other natural disasters, who would ever question taking basic necessities to survive, especially food and water and medicine? Yes, ethicist Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics* is still relevant, certainly coming into play with these complex, and yet very simple, ask and answer, issues. And, what about the Sabbath? None of us follows a Friday evening to Saturday sundown protocol as do our Jewish brothers and sisters. We have graduated to the Lord's Day! Here we are! Even so, none of us observes a day of Sabbath in the strident way demanded in Torah and advocated in its evolutionary forms developed through the years. And, what about

the tenth Commandment in our laundry list of laws, the one that says we should never covet anything that belongs to our neighbor. Well, of course we shouldn't! But, let's read this one again, giving it a closer examination. It reads, "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." Upon further review, football replay image here, this text not only clearly advocates for the ownership of women and the keeping of slaves as prized or not so prized possessions, it even equates women with livestock, a tradable commodity on the open market. Sure, we all know that this was the cultural understanding in this time, but is that an excuse for this ever being an acceptable and expected practice? I think not! Do we really want to post those ideas in any hall of justice as if we are in favor of them? I am just saying! These texts, like all biblical texts, are reminders of the importance, the necessity of context in exegeting, interpreting, and perhaps most importantly, in application. Never would we want to go back to the misogyny rampant in ancient patriarchal societies, systems that afforded women no rights whatsoever, only finding value in a woman's procreative abilities. And, while we are at it, let's dig just a little deeper. As we all know in our study of Bedouin, biblical hospitality, the Israelites by and large, more often than not, understood the idea of neighbor as being limited to their fellow Israelites, and was rarely extended to the stranger, the alien, the foreigner in their midst or in their many chance encounters. In a show of strength and assumed national and racial superiority, as they conquered the presumed Promised Land, they often dominated their adversaries, raping and pillaging with an unapologetic sense of entitled superiority. Frequently, they failed to understand, as a covenant people, that they were chosen to be a light to the nations, not a conquering possessor of the nations. I do not bring all this contextual nuance into focus, daring to suggest that we throw out the Ten

Commandments like the baby with the bath water, that we ignore or suppress them as irrelevant. No, what I am trying to remind all of us is that things are never as simple, as easy as they seem, and therefore they must be interpreted and invoked in light of the continuing revelation that is our gift from the still speaking Spirit of God. Let's be honest, we learn from experience and there is a whole lot of experience represented in this room. Much of life is lived in the nuance, in the complexities of our many realities!

Throughout the salvation history of Israel as revealed in the Hebrew scriptures, there has always been a struggle between two dominant themes, the suffering servant motif in Second Isaiah which offered a vision for the people of God reflected in humility and service. As John Shelby Spong describes it, to “bring life and love into the world through their own suffering,” to proclaim God’s light and love to all peoples, all nations, of course including Gentiles. The second and stronger image, seemingly in direct completion, was developed during the post-exilic leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah who were living in the aftermath of Babylonian captivity with all the insecurity, inferiority issues now plaguing a rebuilding nation. They sought to “build an exclusive, narrow society based on nationalistic ideals and dominant intentions. And, who could blame them” (for circling the wagons)? Recasting history is what defeated people do to lift themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps. It is human nature! “They had been a people in exile, slaves once again, this time to their Babylonian captors, by becoming a military power claiming God’s favor, exile would never be a possibility again. Both agendas are biblical. Each can be argued. And, the Ten Commandments are stretched (straddled) in this theological/nationalistic tug-of-war. Rigid rules by an angry, vengeful deity, or signs of God’s empowering presence in covenant relationship, glimpses of the divine realm?” Pick one!

Into the tension, this vortex, came Jesus of Nazareth to sort it all out for us, despite our continued inability to make the right choice. Jesus challenged the religious tradition into which he had been born. The question of neighbor was addressed in such a radically inclusive way that the very foundations, the lynchpins of the religious authorities shook with an eternal tremor. Jesus would die the death of a martyr, so paralleling the suffering servant of Isaiah that a whole theology developed claiming that Jesus was the fulfillment of that ancient text. Ironically and unfortunately, in his resurrection, the conquering divine was also carried over into the equation, it too recalibrated and retrofitted onto the nature of Jesus. So, the interpreter still demanded a choice.

So, where might we find an answer for our dilemma? As always, we look to the person of Jesus! How did Jesus address the seemingly unequivocal demands of the Ten Commandments? Well, he contextualized them, nuancing them just as is expected of us, but he got to the heart of the matter, getting to the real issue at stake! Adultery? He said, don't lust in your heart! Like Jimmy Carter in that infamous Playboy interview many years ago, I cannot stand here and say I am not guilty. Murder? Don't even think it! Once again, I stand condemned! And, of course Jesus understanding of the human relationship to God trumped anything the Ten Commandments ever came close to suggesting. "You shall love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, and mind (all of your being), and you shall love neighbor as yourself." And, we are quick studies, learning that neighbor means any and everyone within and without our sphere of being. In Jesus' world that included slaves, women, children, gentiles, civil authorities, soldiers, and criminals, all of those who were dispossessed, the disenfranchised, marginalized of society. For Jesus, the law was always a matter of, always inextricably tied, hardwired to social justice. As John Shelby Spong says, "Jesus

abhorred the prevailing vision of the covenant as exclusive, self-fulfilling, judgmental, and self-aggrandizing. He issued an invitation to service and openness and defined discipleship as the vocation of giving life and love away. He denied exclusive claims in the name of all humankind by insisting that God removes the barriers we erect against one another. The covenant, he maintained, has no boundaries of race, sex, or ethnic origin. Christianity was born in this attitude of inclusive unity. ‘Come to me, all. . .,’ said Jesus. Yet the Christian church has repeatedly made those same Pharisaic claims to exclusivity. . .” The Church universal, holy, catholic, and apostolic, and locally has struggled with a legacy of legalism and literalism that has supported exclusive theologies and practices corrupted with the intoxicating delusion of superiority. Today, we continue to live in the aftereffects of those twisted ideals with their flawed assumptions. Many invoke the name of Jesus rather than emphasizing who he was and what he represented. Many prefer him as Christus-Victor, a powerful warrior-king, rather than a suffering servant of ultimate humility. Ezra-Nehemiah beats Isaiah hands down every time, or so it seems. Following Christ is reduced to a transactional theological formula of salvation rather than a chosen way to live one’s life. The difference is anything but subtle. And, somewhere in the deep subliminal recesses of our minds is an ongoing secure smugness that tells us that the gospel is indeed for everyone, if they will simply submit to becoming like me.

Jesus literally brought an ethic of love to the Table, metaphorically described as the Great Banquet Feast representing and revealing the very realm of God. Jesus is love, the essence and embodiment thereof! In his teachings and his actions, he showed us a way to live by the ancient law, a way to honor Torah, to follow the Ten Commandments, covenantal cornerstones of our faith, in a way that would empower and liberate us while honoring and serving God and

one another, allowing us to become our own best selves. Therein was and is their intent, their purpose! Ironically, Jesus showed us that the Ten were way too liberal and way too conservative all at the same time, that they went too far and yet, did not go nearly far enough, that they were lacking, incomplete. He condensed and expanded them all at once in his call to love God, neighbor, and self. He revealed, that at their essence they were gleaned from the heart of a loving and caring, a compassionate and gracious God who always looks out for our best interests and practices, our human being and doing. The Ten Commandments were born out of love and grace and mercy, not anger, not guilt, not judgment. I had a hair stylist once who attended the local Christian Science Church and always, without fail, wanted to share with me when I was held hostage in her chair. Her minister once declared that most of the Ten Commandments could be reduced to one phrase, "Mind your own __ business!" Now, at first, I laughed at what I thought was shallow and flippant, if not a bit heretical idea. But then I began to look at the Ten in light of his comments, and in all honesty, that thread certainly runs through most of them. The Ten by design give us balance, helping us to establish good, healthy boundaries, keeping us from harming one another and even ourselves, damaging community and all our precious relationships. The Commandments then and now are a not so subtle reminder of our propensity, our proclivity to misbehave! Oh, we do not need a reminder that we are so human! Jesus reminded his world and ours that the law of God is really all about covenantal relationship, what I like to call beloved faith community, and not primarily about rules and regulations, though that is certainly in there as well. Jesus reminds us that we can obey the Ten, and just like the rich young ruler fall far short of the mark, losing our very soul because we failed to be loving, allowing us to live life to its fullest, embracing, immersing ourselves in God's "extravagantly

welcoming”, expansively inclusive, and radically hospitable Spirit. As Spong would say, to “love wastefully” in every way imaginable. That, my friends, is gospel! The more you give away, the more you have to give away. The capacity within you just keeps growing, continuing to multiply in every way imaginable! Love is Jesus’ commandment above and beyond all others, more than anything else, rendering the Ten almost completely unnecessary or obsolete. For when we are loving, when we love we no longer need these pedestrian, perfunctory guidelines. To use a Pauline image, it is as if the Ten were milk for the immature, a people only beginning to discover their way forward with God, just starting a journey toward growth and maturity. Love is the meat of faith and belief, the full flower showing just how far we have come, just how advanced we are. Love is the very DNA of living in God’s realm here and now as a covenant people drawn in relationship both to God and to one another, allowing us to become our best selves. So, hear the eleventh commandment, which ironically is the first, and come to think of it, the last as well. Hear it well; hear it clearly, “Let us love one another!”

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, sustains, and continues to call us to love above all else. Amen and amen.

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© October 8, 2017

