

## Commandments of Love, Ripples of Faith

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 and Matthew 22:34-40

Rev. Beckie Sweet

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**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 (NRSV)** ~ 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 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. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ...

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."

**Matthew 22:34-40 (NRSV)** ~ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

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An empty frame.

For years, it was hanging in the lobby of the courthouse in Pulaski County, Kentucky. It was a blank, and showed that something was missing, and some said it looked rather ridiculous. But this picture of nothing was not nailed to the wall as a joke. Instead, it was put up as a testimony to something that had been taken away.

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The frame used to contain the Ten Commandments, but in 2001 a US district judge ordered that the display be removed, a decision that was upheld by a federal appeals court in 2003. It was determined that courthouse postings of the Ten Commandments violate the First Amendment of the Constitution, an amendment that forbids Congress from making any law "respecting an establishment of religion."<sup>i</sup>

Down came the commandments, by order of the court. But the empty frame remained.

The legal and political battle concerning this and similar cases is still in litigation. But what is clear is that "Pulaski's empty frame" does raise the question of where the Ten Commandments belong in our own lives. We should be asking ourselves: "Am I displaying these laws of loving relationships clearly in my own daily words and deeds?" "Am I keeping them prominently posted in my personal life and faith witness?" "Or, am I an empty frame?"

As people of faith, we must fill our frames with not only the Ten Commandments, but with the Great Commandments Jesus gave us, as well as with all of the virtues of a Spirit-gifted life.

Before the days of Jesus, however, the leaders of the People of Israel determined that there was a need to expand upon the Ten Commandments given by God through Moses to the people. The original 10 became 613 rules or commandments as recorded in the Torah. 365 of these were stated in a negative way (one for each day of the year), and 248 were stated in a positive way! Each commandment was intended to address a potential pitfall into which one could plunge or prescribe the means for redemption.

But, getting back to where we started, it is true that the Ten Commandments contain a list of rather daunting "thou-shalt-nots," but these 10 rules are not meant to drag us down into negativity. In fact, they are intended to give us a very positive framework for living. The first four commandments provide us with guidance for our relationship with God, and the last six explain what it means to have healthy relationships within the human family. So, you can think of the Ten Commandments as being two pictures, instead of one.

**Picture One: *Love God.***

**Picture Two: *Love One Another.***

These two pictures are equally beautiful, equally innovative, equally well-crafted, and equally necessary for an abundant life. Jesus also employed this two-frame approach as he offered the greatest commandments: to **love God** with all your heart, soul, and mind, and to **love your neighbor** as yourself. It all sounds so simple, and yet, in real life, we know these simple commandments prove to be a daily challenge.

We find ourselves tempted to bow down to the idols of Wall Street, Hollywood, adversarial political agendas, and resentment among families, neighborhoods, and co-workers. These simple commandments are often countercultural! Just one example is the difficulty/struggle that so many of us have in maintaining a sabbath day in a fast-paced, over-programmed, and ever-accelerating 21st Century culture.

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Clearly, these commandments are designed to help us, not to hurt us. We tap into a source of energy, security, comfort, healing, and spiritual wholeness when we worship God, rather than the powers of this world. And we lead a much healthier life when we take the time to rest, instead of working, or being available to work, around the clock, seven days a week. The worship of God's majesty proactively prepares us for a life-time of spiritual strength, and provides the fortitude needed to love all of our neighbors with a compassionate, Spirit-infused love.

Similarly, the second frame of our commandments, despite all of the "thou-shalt-nots" contains an enormous amount of liberating guidance and direction. For despite our natural human tendencies, living and relating to one another in ways that show respect and love, frees us of the stress of jealous competition, demeaning bullying, and the desire to do another harm.

These commandments, some of which are couched in "thou-shalt-nots" are not about the negatives -- they provide a positive framework for a life that powerfully constructs standards of living within relationships which build up the human family, creating neighborhoods of care. When we honor our parents, prohibit murder, resist adultery, turn from stealing, speak with truthfulness, and refrain from envy, then we find ourselves much better able to love our neighbors as ourselves. The keeping of these commandments moves us into relationships that not only reflect the will of God, but also provide us, and by virtue of proximity, those around us, with much happier and healthier lives.

In fact, I contend that living within the framework of our two commandments to love God and love one another, we have the opportunity to begin a ripple effect of faith-filled living that has the potential to transform the world with a balm of Christian love that can heal past hurts and strengthen each one's resolve to offer the love and care that unites, rather than divides. We see this when persons are the recipients of God-motivated mission. So often, their lives are so transformed by receiving God's care through human agents, that those recipients commit to passing the gift of love on to others.

Case-in-point: While serving in my first parish, I was pressured into becoming the treasurer of the Deposit Area Food Pantry. That meant that I not only needed to track the inventory of the Pantry and insure that items needed would be replenished, but I also worked cooperatively with the chairpersons for the Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter food basket distributions in order to pay for any supplies being purchased to fill the baskets. At that food pantry, our holiday basket distribution lists saw little change from season to season. 95% of the names on the list remained the same, as folks continued to struggle with poverty. Food basket distributors and recipients became very familiar with one another over the course of a couple of years. I became particularly close to one young family: parents and four children. It was obvious that they always tried to look neat and clean as they arrived to pick up their basket, but their clothes were worn so badly that they would not have been accepted at any church rummage sale. The gratitude they expressed each time they received a basket was so genuine, that it sometimes flowed in the form of tears down both their cheeks and mine. Each time the

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family came to receive a basket, I silently prayed that the children would grow up to be loving and successful adults, even though their circumstances that day were quite bleak.

Then, one Easter, this family's name was no longer on the list. I made note of that with one of the other volunteers, and we both mentioned the hope that everything was alright, and that everyone was healthy. At Thanksgiving time that year, again, the family's name was not on the list. And yet, as folks were lined up coming into the pantry for their baskets, I could see that family's familiar faces, but this time they were marked with grins. As they came closer to the distribution point, I could see them struggling to walk up the steps....struggling because each family member was carrying two bags of groceries to be donated to give to others. As they approached me I went out to greet them and help the youngest with her bags, and they very gleefully exclaimed that things had turned around for their family. Employment was steady for the first time in years. So, in gratitude for all that others had done for them, they decided to save a portion of their grocery money each week since July in order to purchase items to donate for the benefit of others. This time, the tears were filled with joy as the family stayed to help with the distribution of baskets.

That, my friends, is the ripple effect of LOVE. Love God. Love one another. The pebble dropped in the pool of water will radiate ripples as far as the eye can see. Each God-inspired gesture of love given to others will radiate the joy of serving Christ for all the world to see. As we continue to prayerfully consider and decide on how we will support the ministries of Christ's church in the world and complete this year's pledge cards, I encourage you to consider how your gifts express your gratitude for the gifts that started the ripple effect in your life of faith.

Will folks see within the frame of our lives the pebbles of faith and love with ripples extending in all directions? What is the picture of loving God and loving others that forms our family portrait this day?

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<sup>i</sup> Homiletics, Vol. 17 Number 5, September-October 2005, p. 36. Timothy Merrill, Executive Editor, Communications Resources, Inc., Canton, OH.