

The Ten Commandments
Wednesday, February 24, 2010
Exodus 20; Matthew 5; Large Catechism

When I teach the Ten Commandments to confirmation students, I break the class into small groups and give them a task: "You've been designated 'God for a Day.' You've rescued a few humans from an Earth-wide disaster and transported them to an unspoiled planet. You want them to avoid repeating their mistakes; and to remember who saved them, and why. So you give them some simple rules to live by. Your task is to come up with FIVE commandments. They can be taken from the original Ten, or you can create new ones; but you must explain WHY each was chosen, and why it's important for the survivors, and all generations that follow, to remember and obey them." This generates great discussions! Even when groups come up with commandments not taken from "The Big Ten," most of their choices echo them clearly. They focus on not killing or hurting other people; honoring and respecting God; working for peace; and being thankful.

Even kids who groused about the existence of rules admitted it's wise to have a few simple ones to live by. They resisted arbitrary, impersonal laws, but saw the benefit of rules for living in loving relationships. That *didn't* stop them from breaking family rules or arguing with parents about enforcement and consequences, though!

But today, many people view the Ten Commandments precisely *as* impersonal, arbitrary rules imposed by a capricious Deity upon a primitive, violence-prone tribe. At best, they point to the fact that they're not terribly different from laws and taboos found in cultures around the world. Even to some of us, the commandments might seem impersonal, arbitrary, legalistic, or outdated. We might wonder why the Church, or God, makes such a fuss about something that, after all, has been superseded (hasn't it?) by the Gospel. We've all probably done our "mental checklist:" we haven't killed anyone lately; haven't cheated on our spouse; okay, we've spread a bit of gossip; yeah, we let the cashier give us too much change; and okay, we've coveted our neighbor's new whatchamajigger. But when we tot it up, we probably wonder why God would get his theological shorts in a knot over stuff like that.

There are Lutheran pastors who shy away from teaching the Ten Commandments, deeming them the tip of a legalistic iceberg to be avoided as we sail in the ship of God's grace. Since nobody can keep the Commandments perfectly; and since we're all sinners anyway, they believe that we should stop obsessing over these reminders of Law; rejoice in the Gospel; and just follow Jesus' command to love one another.

Martin Luther would be appalled. Champion of unmerited grace that he was, you might think he'd downplay the importance of the Commandments in the lives of Christians. You might assume that he'd contrast Pha-

risaical obsession with Law with evangelical freedom in the Gospel. After all, Luther had nothing but scorn for legalistic nit-picking and ritual puffery. He resisted any hint of works righteousness. But here's what *he* said about the Ten Commandments:

Here, then, we have... a summary of divine teaching on what we are to do to make our whole life pleasing to God. They are the true fountain from which all good works must spring, the true channel through which all good works must flow. Apart from these Ten Commandments no action or life can be good or pleasing to God, no matter how great or precious it may be in the eyes of the world.... We shall have our hands full to keep these commandments, practicing gentleness, patience, love toward enemies, chastity, kindness, etc., and all that is involved in doing so.... Just concentrate upon them and test yourself thoroughly, do your very best, and you will surely find so much to do that you will neither seek nor pay attention to any other works or other kind of holiness. For God declares how important the commandments are to him and how strictly he will watch over them.

Luther's words echo Jesus' own in today's Gospel:

"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

The Commandments hinge on one simple fact: *they reflect God's intention for how human beings should live with each other in his presence.*

They're personal and relational, not arbitrary. They're meant for our life and for our good; they reflect what human life - full, free, mature, and wonderful - should be.

Let's see if we can tease this out by using something I know very well: life with dogs. Let's say you want a dog that can help you with rounding up the critters on your farm. You get a dog - a Sheltie, let's say - from the animal shelter. It's a thin, dirty, scared little beast that immediately pees on your shoes, throws up in the car, runs under the table, chews your best shoes, and snaps at your fingers when you try to put a collar on it. But you have adopted this dog out of sheer grace; you aren't about to send it back to be euthanized as an unadoptable reject. "You're my dog now," you say. "I won't give up on you. That's a promise."

That's the first clue. Before God gave the Israelites the Commandments, he made good on *his* promise to rescue them from slavery; he delivered them from Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. Though they whined, complained and kvetched their way to Sinai, God's grace-filled presence constantly preceded them as a pillar of cloud or fire.

God proves his love for us, writes St. Paul to the Romans, *in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.* His salvation didn't come to people who deserved it because they were already living according to his will. His grace precedes us and goes with us daily, even when we do the human equivalent of biting his hand and chewing on his shoes.

Back to your rescued dog. Sheer grace is fine; but rules must be learned, not so that the pooch STAYS in your household - you've already made that promise - but so that he can LIVE in it as a real dog, as a member of the family, and as your partner. Until a few simple rules are learned, he's confined to a crate or a small pen indoors; he's never let off leash outdoors; and he has precious little freedom. Once he learns the house rules - don't pee on the carpet; don't chew the furniture or shoes; don't bite - his horizons expand. When he learns to walk on a leash without fighting; and to sit, stay, or come when called, his life becomes even more spacious. Far from restricting his freedom, the "house rules" actually give him more freedom!

The Ten Commandments function that way, too. How "free" are we when the rule of law breaks down? How free are we when we have to lock our doors, carry a gun, and live in fear of predatory muggers, burglars and rapists? How free are we to love, respect, and trust each other when we're also "free" to lie; backbite; sleep around; trash each other's reputation; or lure away the loyalty of another's employees?

God's Commandments are like ever-expanding boundaries, allowing us more and more freedom to live in his household; to live in right relationship with him and with the other members of the household; to just.../live instead of merely existing.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. "Don't chew; don't bite; don't pee on the carpet" are, in a sense, secondary house rules, even though for the sake of good order they are often introduced first. What's primary is forging a proper relationship - whether it is God with us; parents with a child; or dog owners with a new dog.

When Wink Mason, one of my herding instructors, takes on a new dog, it's *his dog*. Except for, perhaps, his vet, he doesn't want *anyone else* caring for his dogs; they are to look to him alone for everything they need to live with him; and they are to listen to no one else's voice. He is the center of their lives; he is, quite literally, the face of God to his dogs. They are expected to listen to him and learn the commands needed for everyday life and for the specific tasks a farm dog needs to know. They are expected, as they develop the capacity, to obey those commands quickly and consistently, even when they are interested in "doing their own thing." Wink is perfectly willing to put the fear of God into any of his dogs when they blow him off. He's that way with his students and their dogs, too! Cordell has learned great respect - and a little fear - of Mr. Wink; so have I! Yet Wink is very patient when we're struggling to understand and learn; and he is infinitely gentle and self-sacrificing when a dog (or student) is sick or injured. Like I said, he's literally the face of God to his dogs; only on that basis can they become his companions and fulfill the purpose of their lives.

Luther saw clearly that this, on a far more profound level, is what God intends in his relationship with us. Reflecting on the First Commandment, he writes:

The intention of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone. What this means is: "See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never search for another." In other words: "Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl to me and cling to me. I, I myself, will give you what you need and help you out of every danger. Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else."

When this first commandment has true pride of place in our lives, everything else begins to fall *into* place. Elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, from which tonight's Gospel is taken, Jesus says, "Seek first *the Kingdom of God and His righteousness*; and all these things will be added. He also urges us, in the Lord's Prayer, to first call God Father, hallow his name, and plead for his Kingdom to come and his will to be done among us. Then we can rightly pray for bread; forgiveness; the power to forgive; and deliverance. And the famous Love Commandment, beloved even by those who are profoundly uneasy about the Ten Commandments, *depends upon first* loving God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength.

Back to the dogs. Our little rescue dog has learned a few house rules and seen his horizons broaden. He's learning to listen to your voice

and obey willingly and promptly the basic commands - not just for the sake of doing the action required, but far more to deepen the bond of trust and love between you. And he's learning to do a job with you. He's putting aside the enticing smells and sounds of the great outdoors; he's restraining himself from cannonballing straight into the flock out of sheer exuberance; he's even learning that he must obey your command when it seems contrary to his instincts, trusting that it serves your purpose even when he doesn't understand.

He can run off leash now; you can send him with a gesture and he'll gallop into the next field, searching for the strays. You can, with a word or whistle, channel his energy so that he brings the sheep over the foot bridge; through the gate; down the road; into the barn. What a life! It's worlds away from shivering, miserable and frightened, in a crate, ready to die because he knew and heeded no laws or rules or commandments in his life. Now that same dog is eager, working hard, loving life, and turning himself inside out in order to show his love for you. Note: not to *earn* your love. And not without healthy fear and respect spicing the love. But just meditate on that picture for a moment.

Because that's a small hint of what God intends for us. Jesus describes this kind of life as a bright light, shining on a stand, giving light to all around; it's a light and a life of such beauty and winsomeness that oth-

ers see it and glorify God for it. Again quoting from Luther's study of the Commandments in his Large Catechism:

Throughout the commandments which concern our neighbor: everything proceeds from the power of the First Commandment: you should do good to all people, help them and promote their interests, however and wherever you can, purely out of love to God and in order to please him, in the confidence that he will repay you richly in everything. These are not human trifles but the commandments of the most high Majesty, who watches over them with great earnestness, who is angry and punishes those who despise them, and, on the contrary, abundantly rewards those who keep them. Where people consider this and take it to heart, there will arise a spontaneous impulse and desire gladly to do God's will. We are to keep them incessantly before our eyes and constantly in our memory and to practice them in all our works and ways. Each of us is to make them a matter of daily practice in all circumstances, in all activities and dealings, as if they were written everywhere we look, even wherever we go or wherever we stand. Thus, both for ourselves at home and abroad among our neighbors, we will find occasion enough to practice the Ten Commandments, and no one need search far for them. From all of this we see once again how highly these Ten Commandments are to be exalted and extolled above all orders, commands, and works that are taught and practiced apart from them. Therefore we should prize and value them above all other teachings as the greatest treasure God has given us.

What else can I add except: AMEN?!"