

“Idols of Any Form”

Exodus 20: 1-3 (Common English Version)

You must have no other gods before^a me.

⁴ Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. ⁵ Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the LORD your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. ⁶ But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation^b of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance; the LORD won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.

⁸ Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. ⁹ Six days you may work and do all your tasks, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you. ¹¹ Because the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

This week we are moving to talking about the actual commandments individually. Ideally, we would spend one week on each of the commandments but for our series, we are dividing the Ten commandments into two groups to achieve the same purpose, the first group being our relationship with God while the second group being our relationship with our neighbor. This honors the traditional understanding of the Ten Commandments. It also reflects the why behind when Jesus was asked what is the Greatest commandment, he said, To Love your God with all your heart, mind and strength AND to love your neighbor as yourself.

This first group, otherwise known as the First Tablet, governs our relationship with God. “They point us towards God, showing us that the point of life is to be attuned to God, meaning that we are called to turn away from other things, and seek only God.”

So let’s take a more in depth look at these first four Commandments:

First Commandment: No other Gods

This is the ultimate commandment. We are not to put anything before God. We have to remember that even though, Israel was supposed to be a monotheistic religion, it wasn’t always practiced that way. We have story after story in the Old Testament of how the people forgot God, how they worshipped other gods. We have story after story of the consequences of these actions. Time and time again, the people turned away from God and in doing so, they always forgot their call to care for the least of these. All the prophets reference the empty worship practices of the people, how they would make grand gestures in the temple but ignore the widows and orphans. Or as we like to say it: Practice our faith for an hour on Sunday morning and then forget about it the rest of the week. The understanding behind this commandment is that anything can be turned into a god when we seek only that, when we center our lives around only that: “Money, Power, Fame, Pleasure, Beauty, even religion” can become a god. And just like for the people of

ancient Israel, “when we fail to [put God as our center], it is not us who pay. It is our neighbors.”

Second Commandment: No graven images/No idols

When we see this commandment we tend to think of little statues made of stone or wood or maybe even the story of the golden calf comes to mind. As modern day people of faith, we think we can brush this commandment off because it is old and antiquated. We assume we don't have any idols. However, this commandment refers to more than little statues. It refers to anything we worship, to anything we center our lives around that isn't God. And in our “modern context, we know that there are plenty of idols in our midst. Money, power, fame, pleasure, beauty, even religion can become an idol. And we can clearly see the consequences of worshipping these idols, consequences in which our children and our children's children will still be dealing with the effects. The world we leave them has been stripped of its natural resources and polluted by our greed. Our idol of consumption has created temples out of sweatshops which are filled with child labor. Our idol of power has us ignoring the beatitudes Jesus shared with us in the Gospels. As modern day people of faith, we can no longer deny the existences of idols in our midst.

Third Commandment: Don't take the Lord's name in vain

As kids, this was always the one we knew and feared. We would hear someone say

Oh My God and immediately, we would say...Oh you are going to get in trouble.

Well, yes and no. The better translation of this commandment is: Do not misuse

God's name This commandment goes beyond using swear words. "The

fundamental concern behind this commandment is the attempt to manipulate God

by invoking God's name for evil or selfish purposes." You see, knowing

someone's name indicates a relationship. There is power in knowing the name.

There is connection in knowing the name. This commandment reminds us that yes

there are occasions where we are called to speak in God's name, especially when

we see acts of injustice and mercy. But we are not God. And we cannot speak

God's name to condone actions which go against the very nature of God. For God

to be God, God must act in ways which reflect the character of God which is

loving and steadfast, faithful from generation to generation. When we give

credence to actions which go against the very character of God, we diminish God.

We turn God into an object we control. We destroy our relationship with God and

with others.

Fourth Commandment: Keep the Sabbath

This commandment is rooted in rest and justice. It reflects a way of life that is centered in renewal and restoration. We are called to rest because on the seventh day God rested and enjoyed the Creation God made. We are called to rest because our ancestors in faith worked for Pharaoh who was a harsh task master. Sabbath is about God's abundant grace. Sabbath is a non-violent way to shift power. Sabbath is a way to reverse the world's narrative, moving it away from the all mighty dollar as its center to re-establishing it around rest and renewal.

As we look at these first four commandments, we could easily think of them as words we put on a plague which are now obsolete. After all, as I was preparing this particular sermon, I came across a study which stated that for the most part, people believe that we can do away with the first set of Commandments and focus our attention on the second set because they are the only ones necessary.

Take a few minutes and let that sink in for a moment. This particular statement has been bothering me all week. Not just because it shows my livelihood is at stake and not just because it names the trend of decline in the wider church. This statement has bothered me all week because it completely skews the understanding of why our relationship with God is important. Our relationship with God is not something we can pick up when it is convenient for us. As people of

faith, our relationship with God shapes everything we do. From our interactions with others, to our understanding of what justice looks like, our relationship with God is central to who we are as the Body of Christ here on Earth. It is the very context which surrounds these first four commandments.

Because these first four commandments invite us into a way of being, into a way of life that is not based on the narrative of this world. Rather, it is based on the narrative that we are safe and secure in the arms of God. It is based on the narrative that because we know God is at work in this world, we know that death and darkness will not have the last word. These first four commandments remind us that first and foremost, we are beloved Children of God, named and claimed and loved more than we will ever know.

This knowledge which is the very foundation of our relationship with God is too wonderful to even begin to comprehend. It is humbling and renewing all at the same time. This is what the psalmist is talking about when he says, I look up at the night sky and see all the stars, too numerous to count, and know that you created this vast universe and still lovingly formed my inward parts, shaping me in your image, and claiming me as your own.

With this sense of awe and wonder at our center, everything shifts and takes on new meaning. We can give grace to others because grace was first shown to us.

We can share love with others because love was first shown to us. We can show mercy to others because mercy was first shown to us.

Without this sense of awe and wonder, even our acts of kindness, although well intentioned become ways we show power over others. Because it allows us to do acts of charity for others without ever fully engaging them as a person, without engaging them as our brothers and sisters, without seeing that they too are created in the image of God.

Without this sense of awe and wonder guiding us, our actions simply become that...actions, turning people into a mission, turning people into faceless and nameless objects we can use and abuse, turning people into ways in which we can feel better about ourselves.

For us as people of faith, our relationship with God reminds us who we are and whose we are. It is what transforms us into becoming the people God created and calls us to be. Our relationship with God is what gives us strength, is what gives us hope, is what gives us the courage to say to this world time and time again, that death and darkness will not have the last word.

I wish I could stand up here and tell you that this relationship with God comes easily on our part. But I cannot. Like any other relationship, it takes attention. It takes care. It takes work. It takes seeking the Kingdom of God first.

And there are no quick ways to do this. There are no short cuts. It is a process. It is a journey, one in which day in and day out, we are called to ground ourselves in the word of God, to read our sacred texts, to practice our spiritual disciplines, to listen for the Spirit of God, moving in and among us. Working on our relationship with God takes placing no other gods before our God, takes not creating idols out of anything, takes not misusing God's name, takes keeping the Sabbath. Cultivating our relationship with God takes loving God with all our heart, mind and strength, never forgetting who we are and whose we are because when we do, it is not us who pay. But rather, our neighbors who do.

It is my hope and my prayer that we take these first four commandments and allow them to become a part of our very being so that they guide our actions as we work to bring about God's Kingdom here on Earth just as it is in Heaven. May it be so. Amen.