

**3 Lent – Year B – March 18, 2009 - Homily**  
**Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22**  
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They have been the cause of lawsuits and the subject of movies. We are reading them each week at our Sunday services throughout Lent. They are well known as the foundational moral imperatives of three great religious traditions: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Jesus summed them up in the Great Commandment to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. They are, of course the Ten Commandments or the Decalogue.

The Ten Commandments seem clear enough, for the most part, and yet they have inspired hundreds of interpretative laws contained in the traditional Jewish Talmud, including the *Mishnah* or oral laws. As we have seen from the Gospel accounts, Jesus was always being challenged for working on the Sabbath. The commandment is to keep the Sabbath holy and not do work. The Talmud defined exactly what work entailed. In Mark, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' criticism with these words, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath;" [Mark 2:27]. What is the commandment really telling us? Is the Sabbath commended to our remembrance simply so that we take a day off work, or is there more to this that God deeply desires for all of His creation? We get a strong hint in the wording to "keep it holy". The Sabbath is a time of rest from the labors of the world – the stuff we do to keep hearth and home together and pay our bills.

To be holy is to be set apart for God. By virtue of our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, you and I are already holy - set apart and marked as Christ's own forever. We are called to God's service and make choices that set us walking along the path to greater holiness, or not. The ultimate transformation for human beings is into the holiness of Christ-likeness. To take one day a week out of our busy lives and keep it holy then is to rest, yes – especially from worldly labor, or the kind of work that is concerned with worldly things. But also to remember God in a more intentional way by taking the time to gather in community to worship the Lord, to be strengthened through Holy Communion, to study Scripture, and to serve the Lord through all the things we are and do that show God's love to our neighbors. According to at least one author, Sabbath rest and our remembering to keep the Sabbath holy is the way God works the miracle of forgiveness, renewal and hope in us through the Word and Sacraments. I would also add that it is a time that we offer ourselves to God for healing and spend time with God in thanksgiving for all our blessings.

The original command of Sabbath rest, given through Moses to God's chosen people, Israel, extends to Gentiles, animals and all creation. The aliens and slaves amongst the Israelites were also compelled to take a day of rest. Within the laws of the Book of Leviticus we find that every seventh year is also a Sabbath year, and the land must be allowed to rest fallow. As any farmer would tell us, that is actually good agricultural practice to maintain the fertility of the soil without exhausting its natural minerals and nutrients that help produce a healthy crop. The Sabbath then, as Jesus says, is to keep us healthy, remind us, and bless us with time to honor God. It is not intended to become a law unto itself, where we make it an idol to prove that we are pious, like the Pharisees did.

The other commandment which attracts a lot of attention is "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God". In other translations of the Scripture, it reads "you shall not take the name of God in vain" or "you shall not invoke with malice the Name of the Lord your God." In the Exodus account of the Decalogue this is described such that God will not acquit anyone who misuses God's name. Many of us have come to think that this means we should not cuss using God's name or Jesus' name because that is blasphemous. While it is good to avoid that kind of association between cussing and our Lord and God, it is not really the meaning of the commandment, which quite literally carries with it a much more serious charge. The Hebrew text literally means, "You shall not *carry* God's name in vain." There are at least two ways to interpret this commandment. The first

concerns apostates who have turned against God or Christ, but continue to invoke God's name or Jesus' name as a means to gain power, respect, or to intentionally discredit God through their evil acts. The second is closely linked. These are people – believers or non-believers - who misuse God's name or Jesus' name to justify purely selfish deeds or acts of self-aggrandizement. Each are carrying God's name in vain. And it's important that we ask why would our all powerful, gracious God care about this so much?

That brings us to the final point of the Ten Commandments, and to Jesus' summary in the Great Commandment. We can see that the Decalogue basically falls into two categories: offenses against God, and offenses against our neighbors, especially the kind of things we would not want someone else to do to us – and hence the so-called Golden Rule. The Decalogue then is a reminder that above all else, we are called to worship and honor God as our creator and redeemer. This is the primary function of our entire existence. It is in fact, what all creation is created to do. Specifically for humanity – it is the work of our being. As Christians, Jesus is our exemplar, yet not just in prayer and regular worship. Loving God, putting God first was, for Jesus a way of life. We too can make a habit of turning our hearts and thoughts to God, subjecting all things in our lives to God's will. If worshipping God as a priority sounds strange to our ears, it is because we are frail and sinful humans. All too often we do lose sight of God's desire to be in relationship with us in the most intimate way, where God is our gracious lover, and we are God's beloved. Relationship is at the heart of the Ten Commandments. Living in relationship with God is first and foremost. Living in relationship with one another is about live together in *Shalom*. *Shalom* means a life imbued with love and peace, always extending God's justice in the world, through the Godly community that is the Body of Christ. God cares about how we use His name because God is love.

Scripture offers a multitude of layers that challenge us to stretch and grow in understanding, reaching far into the depths of God's love for us. And so you and I come back to the Word again and again. God speaks to our hearts afresh, because we are never in the same place on our spiritual journeys. May we all enjoy a renewed sense of God's grace in the Words from the Book of Exodus that tell of God's commandments for life.

Amen.