

Sunday, March 7, 2021

Third Sunday in Lent, Year B

Prayer of the Day

Holy God, through your Son you have called us to live faithfully and act courageously. Keep us steadfast in your covenant of grace, and teach us the wisdom that comes only through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

First Reading: Exodus 20:1-17

After escaping from slavery, the Israelites come to Mount Sinai, where God teaches them how to live in community. The Ten Commandments proclaim that God alone is worthy of worship. Flowing from God, the life of the community flourishes when based on honesty, trust, fidelity, and respect for life, family, and property.

¹God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You 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.

⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³You shall not murder.

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷You 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.

Psalm: Psalm 19

The commandment of the LORD gives light to the eyes. (Ps. 19:8)

¹The heavens declare the glo- | ry of God,
and the sky proclaims its | maker's handiwork.

²**One day tells its tale | to another,
and one night imparts knowledge | to another.**

³Although they have no | words or language,
and their voices | are not heard,

⁴**their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the ends | of the world,
where God has pitched a tent | for the sun.**

⁵It comes forth like a bridegroom out | of his chamber;
it rejoices like a champion to | run its course.

⁶It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens and runs about to the end of | it again;

nothing is hidden from its | burning heat. **R**

⁷The teaching of the LORD is perfect and re- | vives the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure and gives wisdom to | the simple.

⁸**The statutes of the LORD are just and re- | joice the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear and gives light | to the eyes.**

⁹The fear of the LORD is clean and en- | dures forever;
the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous | altogether.

¹⁰**More to be desired are they than gold, more than | much fine gold,
sweeter far than honey, than honey | in the comb. R**

¹¹By them also is your ser- | vant enlightened,
and in keeping them there is | great reward.

¹²**Who can detect one's | own offenses?
Cleanse me from my | secret faults.**

¹³Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not get dominion | over me;

then shall I be whole and sound, and innocent of a | great offense.

¹⁴**Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable | in your sight,**

O LORD, my strength and | my redeemer. R

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The word of the cross is pure foolishness and nonsense to the world because it claims that God is mostly revealed in weakness, humiliation, and death. But through such divine foolishness and weakness, God is working to save us. The center of Paul's preaching is Christ crucified.

¹⁸The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Gospel: John 2:13-22

Jesus attacks the commercialization of religion by driving merchants out of the temple. When challenged, he responds mysteriously, with the first prediction of his own death and resurrection. In the midst of a seemingly stable religious center, Jesus suggests that the center itself has changed.

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Sermon

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen

Growing up in the church, I remember many Sunday School lessons on the subject of the 10 Commandments. I know that I memorized them - several times. I remember studying them in great detail as part of Catechetics. I know we memorized them then also.

Now, I could not repeat them in order or probably remember all 10 on most days. Yet, they remain a main ingredient as we look at the God we serve and how he interacts with his people.

There are any number of jokes about them and often comic pictures with funny sayings. Through it all - they constitute a mainstay of our Judea-Christian faith.

As I continue to focus on the 10 Commandments, I more and more realize that they stand in opposition to what so much of society is projecting today. While that is not necessarily new, it seems exaggerated right now. Everyone seems to be on their own bandwagon and much of society seems to not be attune to the 10 Commandments.

One of the places I tend to go immediately when I study or rethink the Commandments is Martin Luther's explanation of them in the Small Catechism.

That being said, I want to quickly go through Luther's explanation this morning. Why? Well simply so that we get back to a brief but accurate interpretation of God's word to his people of long ago and to each of us today. Let us begin.

First Commandment - You shall have no other gods. Luther then always asks - What does this mean? which I will do only once today. What does this mean? We are to fear, love and trust God above all things.

Second Commandment - You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God. We are to fear and love God, so that we do not curse, swear, practice magic, lie, or deceive using God's name, but instead use that very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God.

Third Commandment - Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching of God's word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.

Fourth Commandment - Honor your father and mother. We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despair nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey love, and respect them.

Fifth Commandment - You shall not murder. We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs.

Sixth Commandment - You shall not commit adultery. We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.

Seventh Commandment - You shall not steal. We are to fear and love God, so that we neither take our neighbors' money or property nor acquire them by shoddy merchandise or crooked deals, but instead help them to improve and protect their property and income.

Eighth Commandment - You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.

Ninth Commandment - You shall not covet your neighbor's house. We are to fear and love God, so that we do not try to trick our neighbors out of their inheritance or property or try to get it for ourselves by claiming to have legal right to it and the like, but instead be of help and service to them in keeping what is theirs.

Tenth Commandment. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. We are to fear and love God, so that we do not entice, force, or steal away from our neighbors their spouses, household workers, or livestock, but instead urge them to stay and fulfill their responsibilities to our neighbors.

Luther then goes on to say - God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we are to fear his wrath and not disobey these commandments. However, God promises grace and every good thing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore, we also are to love and trust him and gladly act according to his commands.

Please also remember that Luther wrote his Small Catechism for parents, mothers, and fathers, so that they could be the major theologians of their households and teach the faith to their children.

It is obvious to me that over the centuries since it was first available, the Small Catechism has not been consistently used in the manner that Luther prescribed. Parents over time have largely abdicated their responsibility to teach the faith to their children to someone else, or somewhere else, generally meaning the church and its Christian Education programs. Enough of my soapbox.

Some years ago, James Nestigen who then was a Lutheran Seminary professor produced a video series that was very popular and made the rounds with many Lutheran churches in our area. His presentation was a new look at the age-old commandments. His insights were terrific.

What I remember most about that series is that his underlying premise was this - the 10 Commandments are the ten basic traits needed for God's followers to live together in community and society.

Think about that for a moment. You may also remember that the Mesopotamian Code of Hammurabi contains 282 laws regarding public and private matters. It explains in great detail property and inheritance, crime and punishments, marriage and family relationships, commercial contracts and even debt relief.

We also know that there were hundreds of laws the Jewish leaders adopted over time and these included what could be eaten, what clothing was to be made of, marriage and family concerns, etc.

In the light of all of this then, our Ten Commandments are remarkable in their simplicity. And we may want to ask if their best modern use is as ammunition against an opponent in our complex moral society.

Another way to consider the Ten Commandments today is to look at them as a covenant, of course initiated by God intended for us to strengthen our relationship with one another and with God. Thought of in this manner, the very first phrase is incredibly important: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

You and I have been freed! Forever! And we have been given commandments by God to allow us to live as a civilized society, to be in communion with others and with God.

In this covenant God does not say to us "I'll be your God if you do these things." Rather, the commandments are presented as the sorts of behaviors that are possible for and consonant with being people who belong to God.

In Luther's time parishioners were to contemplate their sinfulness and recall particular sins they were guilty of committing as they sat and waited their turn to receive the bread and wine of Communion. And Luther suggested that if you were having trouble bringing to mind particular sins you recently committed, he suggested that you simply begin to think through the Ten Commandments and in doing so he was sure certain sins would come to mind.

In the end then we can see that the Ten Commandments are not a set of hard and rigid rules that we must obey, or God will somehow get us, unfriend us, abandon us or even worse, punish us in ways we would rather not think about.

These Commandments are part of God's covenant with his people of long ago and us today. Because they are of God, of God's initiation, they are given to us out of the sense of God's great love for each of us and they are his gifts to us as we strive to live among all of God's creation.

If you have not done so before, I invite you to take a few moments this coming week and reread the Commandments understanding that they are the minimum actions of those who love God and neighbor.

In the world in which we currently reside, living by the Ten Commandments could just bring about real and lasting change. May that change be seen in our world as we grow to respect each other and God more than we have in the past. And may that change be a commitment we make to ourselves, each other and to God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

There is no God before you. Purify the faith of your church, that your people place their trust in nothing beside you. Your name is holy. Guide your church, that in every situation your people's words and actions honor your name. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

The heavens declare your glory. Renew your creation. Provide leaders in the struggle for clean air and water; protect creatures and crops that rely on healthy ecosystems; give all people the willingness to repent when our way of life pollutes the earth and skies. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Your foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. Fill leaders with the foolishness of your peace and mercy. Your law defends the vulnerable. Work through legislators, judicial systems, and systems of law enforcement to protect the wellbeing and freedom of all (*especially*). Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Your weakness is stronger than human strength. Protect those who are vulnerable and give courage to all who are suffering (*especially*). Defend victims of crime and bring redemption to those who have harmed others. Give sabbath rest to all who labor. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You call us to proclaim Christ crucified. Give clarity to this congregation and our leaders, so that we might follow Christ beyond our own habits and comfort. Clear out anything in our common life that would obscure the gospel or that serves our own interests. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

The cross of Christ is your power for all who are being saved. Thank you for (*Perpetua, Felicity, and*) all the martyrs whose witness reveals the power of the cross. Give us the same trust in life and in death. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.