

March 8, 2015

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

Exodus 20:1-17

(Needs the Confirmation Class to read the 10 Commandments)

We had the 10 Commandments as our first Bible reading. I'm sure you know them well even if you can't recite them by heart. They are ten basic rules to live by, but some people summarize them as, "Thou shalt not have any fun!"

Commandments and rules can be downers at times, but they create good order and a justice system. In an ironic way they actually provide freedom. My one colleague, the Rev. Chuck Schwartz, likes to cite a study done at a preschool with a fence around its playground. I don't know the details of this study and I don't know when it was done so I can't verify it, but I assume it's true. Apparently a preschool had a chain link fence around its playground. The teachers were instructed to take the children to the playground, then stand in the center and tell the children to go and play. Researchers noticed that the children quickly ran and often played right up against the fence, the edges of the playground.

Sometime later the fence around the playground was removed. The same teachers were used but a different group of children.

Again the teachers were instructed to take the children out to the playground. Again they were to stand in the middle of the playground and instruct the kids to go play. The only difference was that this time there was no fence. There was nothing boundaries around these children's play. This time the children never ventured more than an arm's length away from the teachers.

Interestingly the fence had provided the children with the freedom to play in the whole space. Without the boundary they were scared to go too far from their teachers.

Perhaps we are like preschool children, and the 10 Commandments are a fence - not a fence to limit us - but a fence to give us freedom to play in the whole space. At first we think we don't want limits. With experience we discover that we want them desperately. We want to know what is right or wrong. We want to know what the boundaries of acceptable behavior are. We need that. In one episode of Modern Family the character Luke says, "I'm 12; I need limits!"

At the Last Supper Jesus said to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." In a way that summarizes all 10 Commandments and it summarizes the whole of the religious law. As Christians we can tend to think we're beyond these laws - that the law of love trumps them all.

That may be the case on one level. But at another level we still need them. They teach us what love looks like. They also teach us what hate looks like. St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." (Romans 7:7)

Yes, these rules, which on one hand sound like they're saying, thou shalt not have any fun, are really giving us the building blocks we need to truly have fun. They are the building blocks of how to be healthy, how to live with each other, and how to live with God.

Those of you who are life-long Lutherans may remember studying the 10 Commandments from the Small Catechism written by Martin Luther. You'll remember that Luther takes these commandments to a whole new level.

It is quite easy to go over that list and say, "You know, I'm a pretty good person after all. I don't steal. I don't kill people. I don't lie - at least not beyond little white lies. I don't use God's name wrongly. Maybe I struggle with coveting a bit, but that's not too bad. Yes indeed, I am a really great person." But in the spirit of Jesus who didn't get caught up in the letter of the law but was more interested in the root reasons behind the law, the Small Catechism looks at what's going on underneath.

There's only 10 Commandments and the explanations go by quickly so let's go through them together. Pull out the red hymnals and turn to page 1160. That's almost at the end. I'm going to have the Confirmation Class come up here and read the commandments to us. You reply with the explanations.

*After the commandments:*

May you find the 10 Commandments setting limits, giving space for freedom, making you to know your need for God's grace, and ultimately love and trust the goodness of our God. Amen

