

A Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Lent - Year B – March 8, 2015
Church of the Epiphany, Richmond Virginia

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In the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Psalmist writes,

*The law of the Lord is perfect
and revives the soul:
the testimony of the Lord is sure
and gives wisdom to the innocent.
The statutes of the Lord are just
and rejoice the heart;
the Commandment of the Lord is clear
and gives light to the eyes. Psalm 19:7, 8*

During this season of Lent, it is our custom to read the Decalogue as we begin the liturgy. It is a reminder to us of the laws given to us to bring order into our common life, to keep us from doing things that are harmful to ourselves and to others and to keep us in the proper relationship with God and with those around us.

There is a sign taped on the back of an oven on the counter of the Café at the Jewish Community Center where I go for my exercise program early each morning. The sign reads, “DO NOT TOUCH. OVEN IS VERY HOT.” I pass by that sign every day, but last Tuesday, I simply could not resist. I looked around to see if anyone was watching. I went up to the counter thinking no one was looking. I reached out to touch it to see if it was hot. Suddenly, I was surprised by the voice of a young lady from behind the counter. She said, “It’s OK, Mr. Knight, you can touch it. It’s not turned on this morning.” Did I ever feel stupid. She surely had my number!

I have a colleague who I suspect speaks for many of us when she admits that sometimes she has difficulty hearing the Ten Commandments. They are all phrased as strong imperatives. They can seem harsh, but my friend then cited a source that was helpful for her as it puts a refreshing perspective on our understanding of why God gave these Commandments to us. Eugene Peterson in his book, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, puts the Commandments in this context when he writes, “Moses spoke to the people: ‘Do not be afraid. God has come to ... instill a deep and reverent awe within you so that you won’t sin.’”

Do not be afraid, God has come to instill a deep and reverent awe within you and me so that we will not sin.

Today's reading from the Book of Exodus describes the vision of how the relationship between God and the people of Israel was to be ordered. It is a vision that follows what God had done for the people of Israel whom he loved, and for whom God continued to care deeply. It is a vision that follows after God had led the people through the Red Sea to safety. Through all, God sustained them with manna in the wilderness. God's passionate love for the people of Israel would never end no matter what. When God spoke these words of the Commandments, God gave them a gift. These commandments would show the people of Israel then, and they would come to show us now, how to live in relationship with God and in relationship with one another. John Calvin, not always the most cheerful of fellows, once said that the Commandments "expose our sin, cutting through our self deception that we are really 'good' people and revealing some of the many ways in which our lives are not what they are supposed to be." They are a gift to us because they provide a framework for us in which to live our lives. Without this framework, all becomes chaotic. We need boundaries. As Scripture says, they are a "lamp unto our feet." The Commandments do not show us what we must do or how we must behave *in order* to receive God's grace. Rather, the Commandments light our path. They show us how we should live *because* we are people who have already been given God's grace. One of the treasures in our Prayer Book is what is called An Exhortation. It begins on page 316. In this Exhortation, we hear these words, "Having in mind therefore, Christ's great love for us, and in obedience to his command, his Church renders to Almighty God our heavenly Father never-ending thanks for the creation of the world, for his continual providence over us, for his love for all mankind, and for the redemption of the world by our savior Christ, who took upon himself our flesh, and humbled himself even to death on the cross, that he might make us the Children of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, and exalt us to everlasting life."

Having in mind, therefore, his great love for us, and in obedience to his command, his Church renders to Almighty God, our heavenly Father, never ending thanks. . .

As God therefore gave to the people of Israel this gift to shape their love of God and of one another, so you and I too receive this gift. Focusing on the Commandments during this Lent draws us once again to see them as a gift that molds our witness to the gift of God's grace, a gift so freely given to us. Each Commandment addresses a particular realm of human behavior . In the 9th Commandment, for example, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." God addresses this one not only to trivial lying but also to higher levels of dishonesty that can, in the course of things, bring serious harm to one's self and to others. There's a true story that was once told about a boy I actually knew when I was a kid. It happened when we were in Miss O'Brien's fourth grade class. It was a crisp, New England autumn day in the new school year. This young boy was riding on the school bus when, for some inexplicable reason, he decided to commit a little prank on the bus. It was harmless one, you understand, nobody got hurt—it was only mischievous—yet it was a prank that would merit an interview in the principal's office upon arrival at school. Now, nothing could instill more terror into a child in that school in those days in the mid '50's than a summons to the office of Clarence Newton Blair, the principal of the Stockbridge Plain School. Nothing, but as the story goes, the boy was summoned to the principal's office shortly after morning opening exercises. It would come to pass that night that the boy, as usual, would sit at dinner with his parents and his sister. This family had a custom

that the sins of the children were not discussed at the dinner table. Dinner was for family time together over a meal carefully prepared by their mother. It was only after dinner that discussions of the sins of the children took place if necessary. Dinner was quiet that night after which the boy's father called him into the other room for that necessary discussion. He inquired about his son's day at school. He inquired about the morning ride on the school bus. The boy knew immediately what was coming down the pike. His little mind began to work. He proceeded to offer his own creative account of the day. Sitting there before his father, he put his own positive spin to the events on the school bus that morning, but you see, the principal had called home earlier that day. His father, however, first listened that night to his son's carefully spun yarn as the boy weaved his own version of the truth until he ran out of yarn. Then the father said, "Is that all, David?" I shall never forget the silence. Then, I will never forget what my father said to me that night. He said, "David, it is very important that we tell the truth even in the small things in life, for if we don't, we will end up not being honest about bigger matters. Telling the truth in the little things," he said, "will shape how we live the rest of our lives." His words were prophetic and they reach into the lives of all of us. It was, as I recall, not many years later, for example, that, in the company in which my father worked, some of the top executives got into big trouble over how they handled the truth in high places. Their manipulation of the truth made the national headlines. They had gotten involved in price fixing. Heads in high places would roll. My father's words to his son were true. Thou shalt not bear false witness. It is important to tell the truth beginning with the little things in life.

Personal stories throughout the ages will give testimony to the fact that each of the Ten Commandments speaks to particular occasions and events in the lives of God's people, for they all relate to virtually every aspect of our lives. Today's reading from Exodus reminds us that these Commandments, these boundaries, have been around for a very long time, and have been a benefit to generations of God's people. You and I stand among those counted as God's precious ones, those for whom Jesus was willing to suffer and die on the Cross, those who have been set apart for generations by God's holy speech and action, called to be about the business of mending God's holy, yet broken world. It was Jesus himself who would add a further dimension to these Commandments when he said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." The Commandments are a gift to us, a framework upon which to live our lives in thanksgiving to God. Eugene Peterson's words to us about the Commandments give life and hope to us as we carry out our work of reconciliation in this world in which we live, and so,

Do not be afraid, God has come to instill a deep and reverent awe within you and me so that we won't sin.

Therefore, today, and for this coming week, and for all time,

*Lord, grant that we in penitence may offer you our praise,
and through your saving sacrifice receive your gift of grace. Amen.*