

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, B
Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
I Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

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“Top ten stress-reducing strategies to simplify your life.”
“Top five parent-tested tips for ending toddler tantrums.”
“Top fifteen quick and healthy dinner recipes—from grocery bag to table in 30 minutes or less!”

Titles like these are great attention-getters. There’s something about that “top-ten” format that promises a simple, practical approach to complex issues. It often promises more than it delivers, of course, but when I’m dealing with the challenges of life, whether it’s healthy eating or stress reduction or raising a child with wisdom and love, I’m grateful for whatever help I can find. I’m looking for words that will teach me how to live.

God is very much concerned with teaching us how to live. And when the Bible sets out to teach us how to live, it starts with its own “top ten” list of sorts-- the Ten Commandments, ten “words” given to guide us in honoring God and honoring other people in all aspects of life. They are meant as a gift, but I’m sure many people do not receive them this way. In fact, I haven’t always viewed them this way.

Many people chafe at the thought that anybody else should tell them how to behave. Especially in the Pacific Northwest we have a pioneer independence that says, I’ll make my own way. I have the right to reinvent myself however I see fit -- and make my own mistakes in the process. Besides that, we’re rightfully wary of how some people use laws and rules like a baseball bat, judging others, asserting their own virtue while putting others down—many of us have been personally wounded by this. It is this kind of rigid, lifeless law that we fear.

But the Ten Commandments were not given to spoil people’s fun. Instead, they are meant to provide a life-giving structure. We see their power when we notice how many “love songs to the law” are scattered throughout the Bible. Psalm 19, assigned for today, reads:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;...
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
Sweeter also than the honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. (Ps 19:7-8, 10)

Now, how could anybody sing so passionately about a bunch of rules? This psalm was written by someone whose life has been full of uncertainties, enemies, and pain. In times of struggle, she has learned to hang onto God's wisdom. So she receives God's laws as something like reliable pavement underfoot after you've been sinking in mud. God's laws channel God's love into her life. They protect her from doing wrong and give her wisdom to understand her situation. (New Student Bible, Augsburg Fortress, p. 631)

We know that need. In class not long ago, someone told about taking a new job and being totally confused for the first few weeks. Her confusion soon led to conflict and misunderstanding. The problem was, her position had no job description, which meant she was always doing too much or too little or trespassing on other people's territory. When they finally created a job description, then she knew her role and could do it effectively.

In this season of Lent, when we're called to examine our lives and recommit ourselves to God's way, I commend these Ten Commandments to you as a valuable job description for living as God's person. I invite you to approach them with an open heart and see how they could mark out helpful boundaries for you. I urge you to read them carefully and consider which one or two commandments hit home particularly for you -- as a guide, correction, warning, or path into a more vital life.

As one example, let's take a closer look at the eighth commandment, "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*"

"*What does this mean for us?*" Martin Luther asked in the Small Catechism (a wonderful little teaching document you can find in your hymnal, page 1160). He explained, "*We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain his actions in the kindest way.*"

I'm not so much challenged by the first part about lying and slandering – not many of us go around telling blatant lies about other people. On the other hand, we don't always follow Luther's positive guidance as well as we could: "*defending our neighbor, continually speaking well of him or her, and explaining his or her actions in the kindest way.*" Other translations say, "*putting the best construction on his or her actions*" or "*interpreting everything they do in the best possible light.*" The eighth commandment challenges all of us to take a closer look at how we can use words either to build up or to tear down the people around us.

Remember how we used to sing, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me"? That song may have helped ease the sting of teasing, but the

truth is, words can wound. Childhood taunts do scar people. Verbal abuse is destructive. Gossip too.

I appreciate the old story of the man who went to his village rabbi with a question about the eighth commandment. He told the rabbi he understood God's commandment against killing, and God's commandment against stealing, but he didn't understand this commandment against slandering one's neighbor. The rabbi looked at the man and said, "I will give you an answer, but first I have a task for you. I'd like you to gather a sack of feathers and place a single feather on the doorstep of every house in the village. When you have finished, return for your answer."

The man did this and returned to the rabbi. "Now give me an answer to my question. Why is it wrong to slander my neighbor?"

"Ah," said the rabbi. "Just one more thing before I speak. I want you to go back and collect all the feathers you have distributed."

"But that would be impossible!" the man cried out. "The wind will have blown them all away."

"Yes," said the rabbi. "So it is with the lies we tell about our neighbors. They can never be retrieved. They are like feathers in the wind."

Once a hurtful word is spoken, it can never be taken back. Rumors that are repeated casually can snowball to where they ruin a person's reputation. The eighth commandment reminds us that communication is a precious gift from God, meant to build others up, not tear them down.

I'm glad to see that our schools are onto this. When you walk the halls of Capitol Hill Elementary you see signs proclaiming it a "No Put-Down Zone." There is zero tolerance for those killer phrases that can slice through a person's self-esteem in an instant – phrases like, "Shut up!" or "So what?" or "Who asked you?" They can be tossed out casually, even in a joking way, but they hit their mark with deadly accuracy and convey the message that "You are nobody. You don't count." Our kids' school is swift to intervene when words become weapons.

Martin Luther says that instead, when we speak to others, or speak about them, we ought to do so graciously, and with charity and forgiveness. We ought to put the best construction on other people's actions, cut them a break, just the way we do with ourselves. Everybody falls short and needs forgiveness. So living as God's people will mean embodying forgiveness, both in the way we treat others personally and the way we speak when they aren't present.

Using words to build up community will mean listening well, patiently, attentively, communicating the life-giving message that "You matter. You're somebody. Your thoughts and feelings are important." This opens a door to the honest and meaningful communication God intends for us.

Sometimes we will be called upon to speak hard words or to confront another person. In these situations, let our words be direct and let our criticism be constructive. Let anger or frustration be expressed honestly, but without cruelty. Even hard words can be spoken in such a way that they build up community, instead of tearing it down.

It is true that words have power to wound, but words also have the beautiful power to heal, to lift up, to communicate worth and value and love. The eighth commandment, just one of the ten powerful words given to us by God, encourages us to use our words as vehicles of God's grace.

And as we strive to live by God's "ten words," let's remember why we even bother. It's because at the root of these commandments is God's covenant, God's gracious promise to be our God, and to allow us to be God's people. All our power for living comes from this amazing relationship which God has initiated. Every gift comes from the gracious God who astonishes us by saying, "I am the Lord your God." God tells us, "You are not alone in the world. I am yours. Now, won't you be mine?" And God proceeds to show us what our lives will look like when we live them not to our own glory but to God's glory. May God support us in this way. Amen.