

The First Commandment

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Exodus 20:2-3 NRSV

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

Mark 10:17-22

As Jesus was setting out on the road, a man ran up to him, fell on his knees, and asked him, “Good teacher, what do I have to do to inherit life in the coming age?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you say that I’m good? No one is good except God. You know the commandments: don’t murder; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t give false testimony; don’t defraud; honor your father and mother.” He said to him, “Teacher, I’ve kept them all from my childhood.” Jesus looked at him with love and said to him, “You’re missing one thing. Go, sell whatever you own and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.” But his expression saddened at this, and he went off in sorrow, because he owned a lot.

Children’s Story

One day, Peter the Possum was playing too close to a cliff. The ground gave way beneath his feet. He went over the edge.

At the last moment, he managed to grab hold of a tree root that stretched into mid-air, the mid-air he himself was now dangling in.

Peter shouted for someone, anyone, to help him. He shouted for what seemed like hours. He shouted until he saw Sammy the Squirrel above him, peering over the new edge of the cliff.

Sammy didn’t waste time. He found a long, sturdy branch and slid one end over the edge toward Peter. Then he planted his feet firmly and pulled Peter to safety.

Peter, as you can imagine, was relieved. And he was grateful, grateful to Sammy. Who wouldn’t be? Sammy had saved his life! Sammy had rescued Peter from certain death!

From that day on, Peter was especially loyal to Sammy. From that day on, Sammy was Peter’s first, and really Peter’s only, friend. Because no one but Sammy had saved Peter’s life.

Sermon

Patrick Miller, Old Testament professor emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary, has written a thick book on the Ten Commandments. I read a review of the book last month and ordered a copy for myself. It’s a good book, and its subject has caught my attention. So today I begin a new sermon series on the Ten Commandments.

I’m not sure how many sermons there will be in the series, not yet. Probably there will be ten. (Who could have guessed, right?) But there could be nine, or even eleven. After all, there is more than one way to number the Ten Commandments.

It’s strange, isn’t it, that we’re not sure how to count to ten? We do okay in the middle, with most everyone — Jews and Greeks, Calvinists and Lutherans — in agreement. But at the front end of the Commandments and at the back end, there are questions about how to divide things up.

That’s okay. It’s not as though the Ten Commandments were carved in stone! Not at first anyway.

The Ten Commandments came first, not carved in stone, but as part of a story. That’s clear from the start, in Exodus 20. God is speaking, thundering and quaking from Mt. Sinai, while the Israelites are shaking in their sandals at the foot of the mountain. God says, “I am the LORD, I am YHWH, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (v. 2).

An entire story, the entire story so far, is there in those phrases and in that name, YHWH. This is the God who appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who made promises. This is the God who heard the cries of Jacob's children, the God who commissioned Moses to lead them out of bondage. This is the God against whom Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt were powerless, the God who made a way for Israel through the sea and across the desert. This is the God whose name means: "Watch me save you; watch me gather you as my own people."

God says, "I have been and I will be your life." The Ten Commandments are part of that story, necessarily, unavoidably part of that story. That's why public displays of the Ten Commandments are so strange. Without the story, the story of God and Israel, the Ten Commandments are as lifeless as a block of stone.

It's the story that demands, to begin with, an exclusive allegiance. The LORD/YHWH says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (v. 3). In other words, "I must be your only god." To use Luther's language, "I must be what your heart grasps and clings to. You must not grab hold of and cling to anyone or anything else. Not 'in front of me,' in a position of greater importance. Not 'alongside me,' as part of a set of gods. Not 'instead of me,' taking my place. And not 'against me,' in some kind of competition for your loyalty."

This claim is made, this exclusive claim, not on the ground of monotheism. Not because no other gods exist. Not because loyalty to those non-existent gods is a misguided fiction. No, the commandment is not interested in asserting monotheism. Nobody in the Ancient Near East thought there was only one god, and the commandment is not making that argument. The point is something different, something concrete. "I am the god who rescued you from slavery in Egypt. I did that for you. No other god did that for you." That's the point. Hence there is the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel, YHWH is our God, YHWH alone" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

Because YHWH and no other god set Israel free, Israel owes YHWH undivided loyalty, devotion, and trust. No one and nothing else before YHWH! No one and nothing else in front of, alongside, instead of, or against YHWH.

Which makes Jesus' conversation with the rich man shocking. The disciples were shocked by the financial implications (see the next verses in Mark 10), and we tend to focus there. Imagine having to give it all away! But the shocking part, the really shocking part is what Jesus does with the Ten Commandments.

Jesus quotes the last six commandments: Don't murder; don't commit adultery; etc. (substituting language about defrauding for the language of coveting). But what about the first four commandments, the ones not about what is owed to one's neighbor, but about what is owed to God: Have no other gods; make no idols; etc? Jesus says nothing about those.

Those commandments are not discarded, however. Nor are they invisible. Instead they are gathered up under Jesus' last instruction: "Go, sell whatever you own, give to the poor . . . then come and follow me." In other words, "Leave behind what you treasure, what has become a god to you, and fix your heart, mind, and spirit on me!"

With those words, Jesus is making an unheard of claim. He is identifying himself with YHWH, the God of Israel. The rich man's question amounted to this: "How can I be a true Israelite?" (A true Israelite would have life in the coming age.) Moses says to those who would be true Israelites, "Have no other gods before YHWH." Jesus says to the rich man, "Have no other gods before me, the one who is speaking to you."

And Jesus' words are for more than Israel. They're about more than how to be a true Israelite. YHWH delivered Israel from Egypt to be his unique people. Jesus, through his being, his work, and his death, all as the true Israelite, frees Israel to truly be Israel. At the same time, through his being, his work, and his death, all as the true human being, Jesus frees all people to be truly human. At the center of that freedom is the Lord Jesus' claim on our exclusive allegiance, because he and no one else has set us free.

The trouble is, we divide our loyalties over and over again. Our Heidelberg Catechism puts the problem this way: We have things, sometimes by our own invention, "in which we trust in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in his Word" (A 95), revealed himself, that is, through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (John 1:14).

That problem, the problem of misplaced trust, shows up in many ways. Some of us trust too much in money, like the rich man in the Gospel. Here's a test. Suppose God said to you, "Sell it all, and give!" Would you do it? I know, I know, God doesn't tend to say that sort of thing directly. And before you start liquidating, you would want to be very sure the voice you were hearing belonged to God. But what if God didn't say, "Sell it all"? What if God said, "Give away one tenth. Give away one tenth of every bank account, one tenth of every mutual fund, one tenth of every paycheck"? God does have a track record of asking for a tenth; the tithe is a familiar biblical concept.

Here's a related question: When the church's mission and relief efforts are cutting, cutting, cutting, because of budget shortfalls, though the earth still shakes, though waters still rise, though people still need to hear about Jesus — when that happens, is God speaking through it? Asking you and me how loyal we are to our money any way? (As if money has saved us!)

We divide our loyalties. Some of us trust too much in our cherished ideas. Take the doctrine of justification. It has been called the "hinge on which all true religion turns" (Calvin). That doctrine has been a cornerstone of Protestantism from the time of Martin Luther until today. The church has split again and again over that doctrine. People have killed and people have died over that doctrine. People are loyal to that doctrine the way patriots are loyal to the flag.

But that doctrine is being challenged today. Not by servants of the Pope, who used to be the enemy of enemies for Protestants. No, that doctrine is being challenged today by faithful Christians who are students of the Scriptures. Bishop N.T. Wright, for one, argues that the Apostle Paul, in his letters to the Galatians and to the Romans — those are the letters on which the doctrine of justification has been built — Bishop Wright argues that Paul does not say what Luther and Calvin thought he said. That, despite centuries of tradition, the doctrine of justification does not get Scripture right. And Bishop Wright makes a solid case for his reading of Paul.

But in some circles, especially evangelical and Reformed circles, Wright is criticized severely, especially by those who put what the doctrine says before what Scripture says. That doesn't sound like loyalty to the God "who has revealed himself in his Word." That sounds like loyalty to church bodies, to doctrinal systems, to cherished ideas, whether they be true or not! That sounds, in other words, like divided loyalty.

We do divide our loyalties. Some of us, probably most of us, cling tightly to all sorts of things that are not God. Hobbies that devour our time and our disposable income. Educational systems that serve the interests of economic powers more than the humanity of students. Political ideologies, conservative, liberal, whatever, that don't have the goals and interests of the the kingdom of God in mind. (Why is it that we carry water for those political ideologies, repeating their rhetoric like gospel? And why, when we are Christians, do we flock together or divide ourselves according to those ideologies? We are one in Christ!)

We cling to all sorts of things that are not God. Our own opinions about how people ought to live their lives, for example, opinions we make sure they hear. And, of course, we cling to our independence, as much as we can living our lives on our own terms.

Those are some of the gods we serve instead of or alongside of Jesus Christ. And they are gods. They are very real. We deceive ourselves if we say there is only one god. If I shape my life for the sake of something, anything, that is not Jesus Christ and his kingdom, devoting my time to it, and my money, and my imagination, sacrificing my family to it, or my church to it — think about where your heart is focused! — if I devote myself to that thing, that purpose, that person, that cause, and all for lesser ends than to serve Jesus Christ and his kingdom through that thing, then that thing has become real, has achieved power over me, has claimed my loyalty. In other words, it has become a god!

And those gods can be good things, things any decent family man can embrace. They can be good things, until they come before Jesus Christ and his kingdom.

But the First Commandment expects undivided loyalty. Undivided loyalty is the only fitting response to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus gave it all away. He gave away the privileges of being God in order to become human. He gave away a self-directed life in order to be Israel's Messiah. He gave away the breath in his lungs in order to set us free, free from the power of sin, free from those gods that would enslave us forever.

Now, because of Jesus Christ, we are free. Free to be his servants. Free to have no other gods before him.

And here's some good news. Today is Ascension Sunday. Jesus ascended to take his rightful seat. He is our God. And he ascended in order to send the Holy Spirit to us. By that Spirit, we are not powerless before other gods. No, that Spirit generates within us life and faith and deep trust in Christ alone, all of it nurtured by Word and Sacrament, through which Jesus Christ says to us, again and again, without ceasing: "I am the Lord your God, who has set you free. Be free, then, from all other gods. Be free by serving me."