**The Bethel Pulpit**

 **Pastor Margo R. Martens**

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 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

**Text**: Exodus 20:1-17

What is your favorite commandment?

Which commandment is the hardest one to keep?

Are there new commandments that you think should be added to these original 10?

Preaching on familiar scripture texts is tough. Most everyone who is listening sort of rolls their eyes and I can hear their thoughts: “Oh yeah; this one again. Time for a snooze. I know all about this one.” Is that how it is for you when you hear these familiar words?

Even so, I want to spend some time with these familiar words. What goes through your head when you hear the word ‘commandment’? Positive vibes? Resistance?

Humans in general (and I think Americans in particular) often have a visceral and negative reaction when someone tells them: I command you! To take out the garbage; to feed the poor; to get home by midnight. I don’t think we have to be teen-agers to respond with an inherent resistance to ‘commands’.

Let’s look again at the text:

Notice carefully those first words: Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

God spoke ‘words’, not ‘commandments’. The Hebrew text does not say ‘commandments’. The FIRST word that God speaks is a word of relationship: I am your God…I brought YOU out of slavery…

God, FIRST of all, wants to claim us a people who matter to God: matter enough to see the agony of God’s people…and set us all free from slavery to sin. And BECAUSE I am your God… BECAUSE I loved YOU enough to set you free from the slavery to sin, you shall have no other Gods but me.

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This relationship setting is absolutely critical to our understanding of all the ‘words’ that follow after this statement of relationship. The ‘words’ about not stealing, not lying, not sleeping around, not trying to get our neighbor’s stuff? We don’t have to do ANY of that, because God is the one who sets these ‘words’ as ways for God’s people to live together in healthy and life-giving patterns of life.

Often, these ‘words’ (commandments) from God are misused and misunderstood. These ‘words’ are NOT:

* what we must do in order to be saved…or loved….by God
* given so that we become better and better people
* a code of law
* meant to ‘free float’ apart from those first words: I am the Lord your God.

So if these ‘words’ are NOT about getting saved or becoming a better and better person, what are they about?

What if I say that the focus of these ‘words’ is God. The focus is my neighbor. That’s all…nothing more.

This God who sets us free wants us to know how much God loves us and is constantly working for the good of the entire creation. God gives us these words as a way of protecting us. Like a parent, fiercely holding on to the hand of her 3-year old daughter who wants to run across Johnson Street, God says to us: Please don’t run out into that busy street of life….please don’t be lying about each other, don’t be murdering each other, don’t go sleeping around, because IF YOU DO you…and your neighbor…will get hurt…and I can’t bear to see you hurting one another.

Jesus knew these words by heart, just as many of us do. When the religion scholars of Jesus’ time asked him what was the GREATEST commandment, Jesus answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength. And your neighbor as yourself.”

Paul, in Galatians says the same thing: “The whole law is summed up in a single commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

I sought my soul…my soul I could not see…

 I sought my God…and my God eluded me…

 I sought my neighbor…and I found all three.

For today, maybe God will give us new eyes to see that the purpose of God’s words for us is to SEE our neighbor…to help our neighbor live well…because God cares about the ENTIRE creation, not just about me…and God knows that when our neighbor lives well, everyone lives well.

I encourage you to read through those ten ‘words’ from the Lord, our God again. Read them both in the Deuteronomy 5 text as well as in the Exodus 20 text. Compare them. They are not the same. Then take your catechism and read Luther’s words of explanation, as he asks, for each one: “What does this mean?” Notice how often in those words of explanation, Luther talks about our neighbor.

Thank God we have a God who loves us enough to give us ‘words’ for our protection. Thank God we have a God who loves us enough to give us people around us who see US as their neighbor; people who are given to us so that we too, THEIR neighbors, live well. This is most certainly true!