

2018 Year B Lent 3
Exodus 20: 1-17
March 4, 2018
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It's Lent, and when I think Lent I think Gifts! I can remember many gifts that I have received over the years. There was that one Christmas my brother and I got hockey sticks and roller skates, so we could play street hockey, there was the PlayStation we received, our very first video game system, there have been books, clothes, and even a remote-controlled helicopter, that I received a year ago. But these gifts, while exciting and fun, eventually lost their appeal. I never was very good at hockey, I would rather be outside than playing video games, and the helicopter, well I think I only tried to fly it one time. These are gifts that did not demand anything of me, they were simply for my amusement, which of course we need.

But, there of course have been far greater gifts in my life. My wife, Laurie, my two children, the people that have shaped me and supported me along this journey to ordination. These are gifts that have asked something of me, have asked me to give myself to them, to share something of myself with them. My wife who teaches me more and more each day of myself, even the parts I don't necessarily like about myself, my children who teach me to laugh more to be like a child, but also demand my care and support as I grow deeper in my identity as husband and father. These are the gifts that we give our greatest thanks for, the gifts that demand something of us, that shape us, that do their work of blessing in relationship.

And so, it is with the ten commandments. I bet you were wondering where I was going with all that talk of gifts. Yes, the ten commandments. They are a gift from God to God's people. That may at first sound strange. Here we are in the middle of Lent and it seems we are being reminded of rules that we all know and here I am talking about the ten commandments as a gift. You know there is a midrash, or commentary on the Jewish scripture, on this passage in Exodus that says the people had little choice to accept Torah from God since God plucked up Mt. Sinai and held it over their heads threatening to drop it on them if they did not accept these commandments. Maybe it feels this way sometimes, as if they are rules we measure up to, a burden we must accept. But today I want to offer a different perspective, one that views them as a gift that has the power to shape us and draw us in deeper relationship with God.

I think we've all heard the commandments being used as rules. Do this, don't do that, live this way and you'll be a Christian. If not, well, just try me! But I think it's more helpful to see these not as rules to follow or moral edicts, but rather as a way of life, a way of living our lives before God. These commandments express God's will for God's people. Yes, it is true that those who ignore them do so at their own peril, BUT not because God is standing over us ready to strike us down, but because these

teachings describe the way of life, they are life. To live otherwise is to wander into the way of death where God's love and faithfulness are of little use.

I don't want to belabor these too much, so I'll just spend five minutes on each command! On second thought, let's just talk about their structure: The commands come to Moses on two tablets. The first tablet describes the proper relationship to God; Don't have any other God's before me, do not profane God's name, no idols and a direction to honor mother and father...It's important to remember whose shoulders we stand on. The second tablet is focused on relationship with neighbor. This tablet with commands against murder and coveting is designed to protect the human community from falling into patterns of life that will destroy that community.

The logic here is this: the way we attend to God, the way we honor God and maintain relationship with God, shapes and informs the way we attend to our neighbor, to others around us and the world at large. Love of God leads to love of neighbor and our love of neighbor springs from our relationship with God. Jesus understood this as he sums up the law by instructing us that the Law hangs on the commandments of love God and love your neighbor. And it is in the life of Jesus Christ that we see these laws embodied.

That is even true, when Jesus is angry. The exchange of goods in the temple made the temple other than a house of worship. It became instead a marketplace which put the emphasis on ritual rather than worship and relationship with God. In his prophetic anger Jesus is calling for a reform of the temple, reform of worship, reform of the peoples' relationship with God. When things aren't right in our relationship to others if people are being exploited, if fear is being taken advantage of for financial or political gain, if women are treated as objects and lesser than men, it's a sign that our relationship with God is out of sorts, it's a sign that we are living apart from God, in darkness and in death. If the practice does not first begin in love, a practice that does not nourish us, a practice that does not lead to life, then it is a practice that can be questioned, overturned, removed. This may come as a surprise to some, but we are not expected to live fully as Jesus lived, we will and we do fall short of the life we see in Jesus. These commands show us the way our lives have fallen short. But it is nonetheless the case that in the life of Jesus Christ we have salvation. And it is through these commands that we see how we are meant to live as people who have already received salvation through Jesus Christ

These commandments are gifts which help us frame our relationship to God. And that's why we hear of them in Lent. Lent itself is another gift. Lent is a gift to the Church because it provides a time to shape its witness, we are invited to ask the question, "who are we in this world?" In the wake of the me too movement, in the wake of Parkland, FL, the opioid epidemic, Charlottesville, "who are we?" During this time of reflection, we are called to confess the ways we have squandered God's gift. Where have we

neglected our neighbor? Our neighbor who is democrat or republican, our neighbor who is a DACA recipient? Who is of another race. Where have we put ourselves before others? In what ways do we take creation for granted? In what ways do we take this community for granted? Lent is about deepening our relationship with God and in turn increasing our love of neighbor. We are invited to take stock of our lives lived before God and examine ourselves, what can be removed, what can be upheld, where does growth need to occur?

We are not asked to do this work alone, in our homes behind closed doors, we have been given the gift of community, of each other, to support one another, to challenge one another, to love one another. We can begin by sharing with each other something of our faith with our friends over coffee, considering together those questions.

A life lived before God is life. It is a gift which demands something of us, that shapes us in the life of Jesus Christ. And as we turn now toward the altar, I pray that it is through our confession that we are reminded of the ways that our lives are not as they should be, that we have fallen short and accept this openly about ourselves and one another. Because only when we have accepted those truths can we then work toward change. And the gift we each receive here today is of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ who sustains and nourishes us for this life together. Amen