

## The Ten Commandments--Liberty in Law

The First Lesson for Sunday March 3<sup>rd</sup>, the third Sunday in Lent, is a familiar Old Testament passage, Exodus 20: 1-17. It is what we commonly refer to as the Ten Commandments—or more accurately the Decalogue (*in Greek* the root *deca* (*ten*)- is combined with *logos* (word), **The Ten Words**. The original Decalogue was given to Moses by God atop Mount Sinai. It was God's direct address to Israel: "God spoke all these words".

God's own introduction to these words is important for our understanding: (v. 2) "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The Ten Commandments are not a law code, a body of laws that are meant to float free of their narrative context. This introductory line about redemption — often omitted from printed versions of the Ten Commandments, unfortunately — is recognized in Judaism as the first word; "you shall have no other gods before me" is the second word.<sup>1</sup>

The Decalogue is personally oriented: I am the Lord **your** (singular) God. These are words given to *you* by *your* God. The law is a *gift* of a God who has redeemed *you*. The Ten Commandments, then, are a gracious word of God and they begin with a word of good news about what God has done on behalf of "you" as a member of the community of faith. The commandments are to be read through the lens of that redemptive confession. God's saving actions have drawn the people of God into a new orbit of life and blessing.

Israel has long been God's people when the Decalogue happens ("Let my people go"). These commandments are given to an already elected, redeemed, believing, and worshiping community. They have to do with the shape of daily life on the part of those already in relationship with God. These 10 words are the commands of the Lord *your* God, who has created you and redeemed you.

"You shall have no other gods before me" (v. 3) introduces the commandments and gives shape to all the others. It's not just about "idols" (think American Idol) "Other gods" could include any person, place, or thing that we hold to be more important or as important as God. Think of the long-standing gods who are worshiped among us, such as money, property, fame, power ... the list is long. The command is to be absolutely loyal to God. In Martin Luther's language, the call is to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. This commandment is the grounding for all other commandments.

While the address of the commandments is individual, the concern is not our private welfare. The focus of the commandments is vocational, to serve the life and health of the community, to which end each of us plays an important role. This commandment lays a claim: How you think about God will deeply affect how you think about and act toward your neighbor. A re-statement of this commandment is found in Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Notably, Jesus uses this positive formulation of the first commandment.

God intended these Ten Words to be Israel's guide to continued **liberty**. They have just been freed from the house of bondage, having spent over 400 years under the thumb of a pagan people. That was the only life they knew. So, God gives them 10 clear, strong rules to keep them from slipping back into pagan bondage, so that they could live the life of God's liberated children. These 10 words come from the God who has reached down into history, entering into an unbreakable covenant with a particular people, and acting historically in powerful ways to redeem them. To help them maintain the liberated life, God gave them this set of simple rules, the "Royal Law of Liberty (James 1:25)." In this covenant, God lays his comprehensive claim on Israel and on us, not as a hard-hearted, heavy-handed tyrant, but as a loving Father who would do anything to save his people (as he so powerfully illustrated centuries later when he gave his only begotten Son for the life of a sinful world).

Having said that, however, there is no doubt that this royal law of liberty is life encompassing and strict—from every dimension of our relationship with God to all aspects of our relationships with others. When we don't live by the law of God, we need a mediator, just as Moses was for the Israelites. Jesus did more than that. He spoke to us in the role of the great Prophet who would take the place of Moses. But even more, he died for us when we didn't heed the Law of God. When we submitted again to the bondage of sin, he gave his life to set us free. The 10 Commandments point to God's amazing love in Christ that set us free to live as God always intended when he gave this Law. In Christ and by his Spirit, we can be free indeed.

The notion that a law can help us be free goes against the lawless instincts of those who live by the motto of "if it feels good, do it." But the notion of the royal law of liberty must be firmly rooted in our lives today and it is one of the foundations of this great country we live in; the beloved anthem, "America the Beautiful," expresses that in these words that seem to echo our text:

***"Oh, beautiful for pilgrim feet, whose stern impassioned stress a thoroughfare of freedom beat across the wilderness!  
America! America! God mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law."***

**Worship Service with Holy Communion Sunday 10 AM**