

## Wesley United Methodist Church

October 5, 2014

"Etched in Stone."

Exodus 20:2-4, 7-9, 12-20

A mother and her two small boys were having a serious discussion about stealing and why it was wrong. "Tell me," she said, "Why do you think stealing is wrong?" Five-year-old Luke said that stealing was against God's laws. He had learned about the Ten Commandments in Sunday School. So mom asked the boys if they knew any of the other Ten Commandments. Luke remembered two others: "You shall not murder," and "Honor your father and mother." But the boys couldn't think of any other commandments until little Patrick piped up, "I know one: 'Pick up your toys,'" Well, that commandment ought to be in there if it's not.

The Ten Commandments have traditionally been difficult to translate into the language of children. A third grade Sunday school teacher was particularly uneasy about the lesson, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." She asked, "Would someone please explain what adultery means?"

A young boy answered, "Adultery is when a kid lies about his age." And then she asked if the children knew what the last commandment was and one little girl proudly stood and said, "Thou shalt not take the covers off thy neighbor's wife." And, of course there is that central commandment to all boys and girls, the fifth commandment, "Honor thy father and mother."

One of the more interesting controversies that engage our land from time to time is whether the Ten Commandments should be displayed in public places, particularly government buildings.

This controversy continues in spite of the fact that just one of every ten Americans believes in all of the Ten Commandments. According to this particular study, 40 percent of Americans subscribe to five or fewer commandments.

That's very American, isn't it. Pick and choose the commandments you like and ignore those who are a little inconvenient. Join with us Sunday at the church of maximum convenience. Choose the commandments you prefer. I believe I'll take 'thou shalt not kill' and 'thou shalt not commit adultery' but my schedule is too full for 'remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.'

We honor the Ten Commandments, but that's not the same thing as keeping them. And so, like everything in this land, the matter ends up in court.

The Ten Commandments fill a unique role in our culture and in our faith. They are the foundation of much of our law, and even if we don't keep them all that well, they are central to our understanding of the character of a righteous person.

We need to take the Ten Commandments seriously. They were given to the Jewish people by a holy God as a set of expectations for their behavior. They were etched in stone, as it were, both literally and figuratively. However, the truth of the matter is that they have always been interpreted situationally. For example, the people of Israel never took the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," literally. That might mean the end of wars. Heaven forbid. The Old Testament contains a record of much killing, sometimes in the name of God. Most modern translations translate the sixth commandment as, "Thou shalt not murder." That comes closer to actual practice. Society has always interpreted these commandments with some latitude.

How do you think our society interprets the fourth commandment: "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy?" I think it means, unless there's a football game or a soccer practice. Still, these commandments are important to Jews and Christians. They give us guidance in dealing with issues we face every day. We need to know them and we need to live by them.

Some friends of ours have this version of the Ten Commandments on a plaque on their wall called, "A Cowboy Ten Commandments." I thought you might enjoy hearing how a cowboy might interpret this ancient code.

It goes like this: 1. Just one God. 2. Honor yer Ma and Pa. 3. No tellin' tales or gossipin'. 4. Git yerself to Sunday meeting. 5. Put nothin' before God. 6. No foolin' aroun' with another fellow's gal. 7. No killin'. 8. Watch yer mouth. 9. Don't take nothin' what ain't yers. 10. Don't be hankerin' for yer buddy's stuff.

That's not bad. Anything that makes the commandments more memorable and more meaningful can help us.

A 19th Century poet put them like this. "Above all else love God alone; Bow down to neither wood nor stone. God's name refuse to take in vain; The Sabbath rest with care maintain. Respect your parents all your days; Hold sacred human life always. Be loyal to your chosen mate; steal nothing, neither small nor great. Report with truth, your neighbor's deed; and rid your mind of selfish greed."

That's good, too. We need to know the Ten Commandments and to use them to guide our lives. God gave us these commandments to help us live satisfying lives.

There is a silly story about Moses. It seems that Moses wasn't feeling well and was very upset. He decided he would go up on the mountain and see God. "You know my life has not been easy. First my mother put me in a basket and floated me down the river," Moses said. "Then I left Egypt for 40 years. You remember the burning bush, the plagues, and then the Passover." God allowed that, yes, he remembered. "There's a lot more," Moses said. "You remember everything, so I don't have to tell you the rest. But I really can't handle much more, and I have this splitting headache." God looked at Moses and said, "Here, take two tablets. That should help."

The two tablets, of course, were the Ten Commandments and they were designed to help humanity, not by putting us in a moral strait jacket, but by providing us with positive boundaries to guide our behavior. Boundaries give us the ability to function in a positive way. But we need to see that the Ten Commandments are only the beginning of the Christian's responsibility. They give us the minimum daily dose of what it means to serve God. They are the minimal requirement for a godly life. Of course, we sometime don't even meet the minimum requirement. We covet what others have. We lust. We steal time from our employers. We abuse the Sabbath rest. We say we serve God, but God is rarely in our thoughts, unless, of course, we find ourselves in a tight place, or we use God's name in swearing.

In two New Testament stories, the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22 and the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, Jesus is saying that obeying the Ten Commandments is not enough. If you really want to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ, you need to live a life of love. You need to live as Jesus lived; living a life for others.

And that's why there must be grace. We can't make it on our own. We need a Savior. And God sent a Savior into the world. His name is Jesus. Someone once said, "Nobody is perfect until you fall in love with them." I want to tell you that God is in love with you. No, you're not perfect, but God sees you through the eyes of love, the same eyes through which God hopes you look at others.