



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Ten Commandments – Ripples in a Pond

By The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

March 11, 2012

Just in case you haven't had enough of the Ten Commandments today, let's look at them a little closer or maybe from a little further back. Since we heard them twice today, it's a good reminder that they appear in the Bible in two places also; as we read today from Exodus and again in the book of Deuteronomy where they are the introduction to the greater context of covenant – the faithful relationship between God and Israel. These aren't a list of dos and don'ts; they are things that matter in the context of the covenant. Also of note is that the original Hebrew word that is here translated as *commandment*, is not that at all. The word means "word" or "saying" or "matter." When translated into Greek, the word "logos" is used, as in "In the beginning was the word (logos)" and "the word (logos) became flesh." It was not until the mid-16th century that the word "commandment" was used.

These ten saying are the basis for the rest of the law, a kind of synopsis of the 613 laws found in the Torah. In the Jewish tradition, these ten sayings were recited as a part of daily prayers along with the *Shema* "Hear O Israel, the Lord is one...and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind." However, at certain times throughout the last two millennia, they have been omitted from daily Jewish worship to avoid the appearance that they were the only laws that count. Today, the ten sayings are heard in the synagogue only three times a year. The people stand, as we do for our creed, to indicate their importance.

I want us to think about these ten ideas together, not as discreet laws that just happen to sit next to each other on a page. They are not just a collection, they are a system and as a system, they influence each other and depend upon each other. As I have been thinking about this for a couple of weeks, I realized that I kept seeing them like ripples in a pond. The first saying is the pebble – "I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other God's but me." The exclusive nature of the relationship that is offered here is clear. It meant to the early Israelites that Baal, the local contender for Supreme Being, was of no consequence. All of the other deities in the ancient world were brushed aside. Here, Yahweh stands alone as the great creator, the prime source of all that is, the divine liberator. And what the people are delivered from is not only Egypt, but spiritual infancy. For us, we are challenged to be wary of anything that achieves power in our lives; money ambition, world view, tradition, you name it. If we are willing, we too can be liberated from spiritual immaturity. A pebble like that will make quite a splash.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The next two ideas, reflect the mystery and power of God. “You shall not make for yourself any idol.” This brings to mind the golden calf fashioned while Moses was up on the mountain but I think that we have to look a bit deeper than that. This isn’t about sculpture, it’s about thinking that we can define and limit God to a particular form. The Sistine Chapel is lovely and evocative but if we make an idol of God’s white maleness, then we have made God small. Let’s not do that.

“You shall not invoke with malice the Name of the Lord your God.” This is not just about watching your language. To damn or curse someone in God’s name is to try to take some of God’s power for your own. The name of God is indeed powerful – so powerful that it was only spoken by the High Priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur. The name given to Moses is the mysterious *I Am That I Am*; an approximation of Eternity and the power of creation. It is power too great for humankind to handle and that’s why we don’t use God’s name casually. So we have rippled out from the teaching that there is only one God to a greater awareness of God’s mystery and power. Which is why the prophet Micah says that we are to walk humbly with our God. We now understand what our own relationship with God is to be like and we know what to avoid.

The next ripple is a transitional one. “Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” One reason for a Sabbath day is to have time free from work to rest and refresh and give thanks. But this is also a time that is dedicated to family. Even slaves were meant to have time off. It is a day free from obligation and open to the joys of personal relationships. You can take a nap; you can take a nap with someone. You can sit with those you love or take a walk on the beach. Keeping this day holy honors God and nourishes our families. It’s one of the sayings that I think we find increasingly difficult. Too many families find themselves caught between the seemingly archaic blessing of a Sabbath and the idols of children’s activities, particularly on the field of play. Probably a whole other sermon, so I’ll move on here.

The next teaching is clearly family – “Honor your father and your mother.” In Jewish terms, your parents aren’t just your begetters; they are your connection to your history and to your inheritance. For a great deal of Jewish history, the question of who was a true Jew was answered by genealogies and it was important. But for us, the important thing here is the character and quality of relationships. Just as the relationship begun in the first teaching - “I am the Lord your God” is self-giving, faithful, and loving, so should relationships be in families. It may appear that the focus is on the children to honor the parents – but it is also incumbent on parents to be worthy of honor and respect. Somehow, the relationship between God and God’s people is expected to be reflected in the family. We all know that it doesn’t always work like that. Not all parents can be described in the same terms used for God – “slow to anger and of great kindness.” We also know that not all offspring behave in desired and honorable ways. Family relationships require hard work and it’s a good practice to keep in mind the ideal against which family life can be measured.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The final five sayings all deal with maintaining harmony in human society – the last and largest ripple. It is probably most important to maintain the connection between these “thou shalt nots” and the presence of God because if we forget God as a mutual human context – i.e. God loves and cherishes everyone equally – then it becomes easier to act from selfish motives. You shall not murder. Murder may be a civil crime with requisite punishments but it is first and foremost a total disregard of God’s presence in another. You cannot simultaneously seek and serve Christ in all people and then overlook the Christ within another. All too often, murder happens because the other has been dehumanized, of no consequence.

The prohibition against adultery may seem as though it belongs in the family category but it is larger than that. By definition, at least two families are involved and that makes it a community issue. It disrupts many relationships and hurts people way beyond intention. In ages past, it was considered a property issue and an affront to a man’s position of authority over his household. But at its deepest level it is a compassionate concern, a refusal to be an instrument of dishonesty and pain – however large love and attraction may loom, at least one child of God is going to get hurt. Best to avoid that.

Stealing and lying destroy the fabric of society. These need to be thought of in far reaching ways – it’s not just burglary with an alibi, it’s defrauding the community and the hope of the weak and the poor. American life is rife with theft and dishonesty, from inequality in income, opportunity and tax rates, to wealth sheltered beyond our borders. Such dishonesty is an affront to God and the things that are important to God. Stealing and lying are the building blocks of injustice.

It is in the last saying that we see clearly the God system of the ten teachings – for when we truly covet something, we have made an idol and we have forgotten to trust in God’s abundance. If we don’t authentically start with the first, we will fall prey to the temptations of the other nine. If we fall prey to the temptation of any of the others, we will have forgotten the importance of the first. So we pray to keep the knowledge of God in our hearts and minds and trust that our lives will be used for good.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org