

Laws of Intended Consequences: God First

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“You shall have no other gods before me.” -- Exodus 20:3

Once upon a time, you could go into almost any Protestant church, especially in our Reformed tradition, and find a copy of the Ten Commandments posted prominently somewhere. Often, they would be affixed to the front wall of the sanctuary, behind and above the pulpit, where everyone could see them every Sunday. They were written in a script large enough to be read by at least the front half of the pews, and they were meant to be read. The thinking was that after you'd glanced through the bulletin and the announcements, and you were looking around for some other distraction before the service proper began, you'd have time to fix your attention on that plaque and read through – and, it was hoped, not for the first time – the Ten Commandments. And you might pause on one or two that seemed particularly relevant to you at that moment in your life – perhaps because you'd just had a fight with your parents or perhaps you'd been skimming from the petty cash at work – and those commandments would remind you of who you were supposed to be and what you were supposed to be doing or not doing.

Like so many other things from once-upon-a-time, the Ten Commandments have fallen out of favor in our churches. I asked my colleagues in the Hillcrest Clergy Association last week if any of them had preached a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, as I propose to do this summer, and I got not a single response. And while I still occasionally find the Ten Commandments posted in churches I visit, rarely do I find them prominently displayed.

We're living in an antinomian time, we're told – an era in which people do not like to be told what to do – and the Ten Commandments are all about telling us what to do. They are the most well-known set of laws ever written and handed down, generation after generation, in western society. Until our generation, that is, when we seem to have decided that each of us is a law unto him- or herself.

Is that hyper-individualistic ethos not reflected in our current arguments about guns? The pro-gun argument is that we need guns to protect ourselves – that we, as individuals, can determine for ourselves when to use lethal force. We have enough knowledge, enough training, and enough judgment – so the argument goes – that we'll know when to shoot, how to shoot, and whom to shoot. And our society will be the better for our having taken the initiative with a firearm.

I wish I were convinced that I'm surrounded by people of such sound and sober judgment and such responsible training, but I'm not. I'm not convinced that most of my fellow citizens are people of sound judgment. Were that the case, I think we'd be making better decisions than we're making, in everything from the candidates we put forward for public office to the mountains of trash we're generating in our throw-away culture to the zoning regulations that force us into

our automobiles just to reach basic essential services.

We live in a society that values freedom, but freedom without responsibility isn't freedom at all; it's anarchy, chaos, and destruction. If human evolution means anything, it means that we've learned, over tens of thousands of years, that all of us surrender a certain amount of our freedom for the sake of cooperating with others who experience the world differently than we do. And they do the same for us. We call that mutual surrender of freedom cooperation, and that cooperation is what allows us to build civilization.

And that's what the Ten Commandments are all about – building a civilization of God's people. They were laws of intended consequences – that's what I'm calling this series of sermons – which is to say that they were and are laws intended to allow people to live together as God's people.

And that's why the very first commandment is about God. These laws were given by God to the people who claimed that god as their God. The identity of our spiritual ancestors was predicated on the identity of the god they claimed for themselves – Yahweh – so the code of laws they developed quite sensibly begins by reminding them of the allegiance they owe to their deliverer.

“I am Yahweh, YOUR God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

This most famous set of laws begins with a reminder of freedom – that the Israelites were set free from bondage in Egypt in order to live for the God who set them free. That's what the Ten Commandments are all about – the freedom to live as God's people. Not Pharaoh's people and not their own people. God's people – that's who our ancestors claimed to be and that's who we claim to be, and these laws, these Ten Commandments, are the charter of that freedom. They tell us how to live into that freedom – the only freedom – that allows us to be truly free.

“Make me a captive, Lord,” the Scottish minister and hymn writer George Matheson wrote, “and then I shall be free. Force me to render up my sword, and I shall conqueror be.”

The life of faith is built on the paradox that our true freedom comes only when we surrender our wills to God's will, our freedom to God's leading, and our plans to God's providence. The freedom so cherished by hippie-dom turned out to be illusory – free to be you and me. The freedom advocated by Dr. Spock – let the children parent themselves – turned out to be disastrous, with a generation of adults who have no sense of appropriate boundaries. The freedom promised by feral capitalism is tearing our country apart as the haves move farther and farther away from the have-nots.

True freedom is found only in the mercy and grace and love of God, the one and only true God, who resists all our efforts at domestication. The God who is neither male nor female; the God who is not contained in a house made of human hands; the God who places all our schemes and dreams under the light of righteousness and finds them all wanting.

The God who created all things, including us; the God who was there before we were and who will be there long after we're gone; the God who loves everything we love and a whole mess of things we don't – in that God's freedom

we find our freedom. Not in the stars and stripes and certainly not in the stars and bars. We find our freedom in the God who said to our ancestors, "You shall be holy to me, for I, Yahweh, am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine" (Lev. 20:26).

Friends, we in the left wing of the church have traveled for too long the path that leads to the other peoples. We have wanted to accommodate ourselves to the mores and the morals of the culture that surrounds us, paying too little attention to the God of justice, mercy, and peace whose ways make us distinct. For too long we have gone along to get along, and it's time, as the front of our bulletin says this morning, that we replaced our wishbone with our backbone. There's nothing attractive about an ugly Christian, of course, but there's also nothing that says that a Christian of conviction needs to be ugly. In fact, if you're doing Christianity right, the last thing you will be is ugly. The new creation that God promises that you can be in Christ Jesus is beautiful and precious and good. And that new creation starts when we acknowledge that we are not our own, and surrender ourselves to the only God who can make us what we were always intended to be.

Michelangelo was once asked how he was able to see the beautiful sculptures he was able to create from an ordinary block of stone, and he replied that his job was simply to chip away the excess stone that was obscuring the beautiful work of art that already lay within.

That's what can happen, friends, when you put God first in your life, as this first of the Ten Commandments tells us to do. If you'll let it, the Holy Spirit can chip away your crude and unnecessary excesses, can smooth your rough and hurtful edges, and can reveal the beautiful image of divine love you were created to be. It can happen. You just have to cooperate by putting God first and letting the Holy Spirit get to work.