

Exodus 20:1-17
James 3:13 – 4:3

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Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 24, 2006

THE UMBRELLA COMMANDMENT

You shall not covet your neighbor's house, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. *Exodus 20:17*

Thirty-five hundred years ago, thereabouts, a nomadic shepherd who had grown up in a king's house rebelled against the king (or pharaoh) and led his slave people out of Egypt and into the desert. If Egypt was hard, a few thousand slaves trying to make it in the desert of Sinai was harder, and they soon begged to go back.

Then a series of natural yet profoundly providential events unfolded, events so speckled with ambiguity, so natural yet mysterious in their timeliness, that the tide of them together built a compelling sense of God's active partnership with the people. That this was a God who was determined to redeem them. First, a hot, dry Chinook-like wind out of the desert pushed back the waters of one of the Great Bitter Lakes, allowing the fleeing Hebrews to pass over on dry land, then as suddenly diminished when their Egyptian pursuers started across, drowning them. Water that built up in sandstone cisterns behind seemingly barren rock, then burst out in a torrent when Moses struck the rock, and quenched a people near dead with thirst. Manna, an edible substance like hoar frost that appeared magically on the desert's sparse vegetation in the early morning saved them from starvation. And then they tired of that sticky yet nourishing manna (which was about as inviting as a slab of Southern grits), and the people cried out for meat from the fleshpots of Egypt they had left behind, plump quail fell from of the skies like feathered hail, exhausted from their annual migration across the Red Sea.

Forty years they spent in the wilderness—not, the ladies would have it, because Moses was too stubborn to ask for directions—but because it would take a long time to mold these ambassadors of God into a unified people: politically, in terms of governance and law; socially, in terms of cohesive and cooperative tribes, clans and families and their responsibilities to the whole people; worshipfully, in terms of ritual and priesthood; militarily, in terms surviving hostile nations around them. They needed time. For as our former colonial states discovered after the Revolutionary War, the “cousins war” as Kevin Phillips aptly called it, the first thing the young nation needed was a set of laws to live by and a constitution whose parameters would define the acceptable conduct of life. So it was that God, through the agency of Moses, declared the authority of the ten commandments.

Lists, no matter how important, are notoriously tricky to recall—how many of us could have recalled half of the commandments before reading them a few moments ago? So one aim of this message is to help us all discover principles that help better embed them in the mind, with the primary goal of discovering why they are so crucial to Christian faith and practice.

One principle we have touched on already from time to time. It's that every morning and evening devout Jews recited one great universal prayer and statement of faith known as the Shema. It was named by convention for the first Hebrew word of the prayer: “Shema Israel,” “Hear, O Israel, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.” To this, later traditions added Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The first four commandments address our relationship to God, the last five our relation to each other, including ourselves, and so address self-murder, self deception, morbid self-interest, and so on. We are to cultivate our best selves. Anyone, as our experience tells us, who cannot love others likely suffers from a poor self image, that is, who has yet to discover their best self, often functions at other's expense. So the Ten Commandments, in first addressing how we are to be toward God, then how we are to be toward our neighbor and ourselves, are an expansion of the Shema.

Lest you wondered what happened to my the English “brolly,” the umbrella, here’s the point. Where the Shema points a twofold structure in the commandments, a sole commandment actually summarizes them all—the last one, the tenth: “You shall not covet.” Covet has become something of an antique word, and as it has slipped into disuse so it has lost its force. Our word covet descends from the Roman name for the God of wanton love, Cupid, who cast his romantic darts indiscriminately. To covet is to desire, but the sort of desire that disdains reason and succumbs to passion—hence “cupidity,” a fickle possessiveness. It is envious desire, like its Hebrew root in the word for lust. This is how it often manifests itself, as wanton desire for someone or something not yet possessed but craved for.

The commandment against coveting is not concerned first with actions or speech but with the secrets of the heart. These are the large desires, the ones so often unspoken because they are unspeakable. The private thoughts and inclinations that put pressure on the will to support them. Here in this last commandment is the one commandment that covers all the others. It is, after all, the will that pays out the reins or pulls them in. Desire unconstrained, undisciplined, or misdirected—insatiable desire—can and has destroyed everything in its path from a life, to a family, to a nation plunged into worldwide war, even as Hitler plunged the world into cataclysmic war. It is the commandment that acknowledges our own frighteningly awesome power to choose good or evil, for God and neighbor and those we have been given to love, or exclusively for ourselves. This is the great summary commandment, the umbrella commandment. Consider how it works.

- You shall not covet or desire no other gods before me. For no other god exists. What you seek beyond me, says God, is an illusion.
- You shall not desire for yourself any idol, any representative thing that supplants my sovereignty over the universe, for that thing cannot function as a god: it cannot fill your deep desire, it cannot heal or satisfy, or impart wisdom, or show love, or forgive, or reconcile. It is a thing created. How absurd to say that the pot is greater than the potter.
- You shall not desire to misuse my name, says God, for to misuse a name is to disparage it. My name is not an expletive, or an invective, nor is my name honored by casual and profane use. Imagine the feeling of remorse and self-loathing in substituting your own mother’s name for mine in such moments. You shall not desire this thing or use me casually. I am *your God*.
- Do not desire to use this the Lord’s day for your self alone. And do not dedicate it first to your self or your family. It is the day set aside for gratitude and the seeking of wisdom the One who gives you all things. Honor Me first on this day, and the blessing will carry over into everything you do.
- You shall not desire to supplant the authority of your parents. If you believe them to be wrong, speak with them. If their conduct is hurtful or injurious to themselves and others, and it does not change, distance yourself from them after telling them, but do this without prejudice or malice. For they are your parents. If you are a parent, exercise discipline in love with firmness. Remember, a family is not a democracy.
- You shall not desire the death of another, for you have no power to create life, save what is given into you by me for procreation, so you must not desire to take what is not yours to give.
- You shall not desire another for your sexual gratification, for we are all tied to each other and to God.
- You shall not desire the death of another, says the Lord. You have no power to create life, save what is given to you in the act of procreation. Even that is a gift in trust, you did not create it. Do not desire to take what you have no power to give.
- You shall not desire another for your sexual gratification, beyond the one you have promised yourself to.
- You shall not desire to take the property of another, their land or the yield of their land, whether by stealth or cunning or trickery or force, for they are its stewards.
- You shall not desire that a lie become a substitute for the truth. For I am the truth, and you are my ambassadors. Seek justice, as you desire justice for yourself.
- You shall not desire any of these things

The reason you shall not desire any of these things is because they are all bound upon promises. You have nothing more sacred to give to God, your neighbor and loved ones, or yourself than a promise. In baptism you make a promise. In becoming part of the body of Christ, the Church, you make a promise. In the social compact between people, by virtue of choosing to live among them, you make an implicit promise. To desire, especially to cling to a desire for something or someone outside of one's promise, is to make a mockery of the promise.

May our loving God help us keep faithful to the promises we have made.

Amen