

NEW VISION UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
1600 Mangrove Avenue, Suite 177
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11:00 -- Sunday Celebration Worship

“Take Two Tablets”

November 8, 2015

Preached by: Jim Peck, Pastor

Scripture Readings: Exodus 20: 1 - 21; Deuteronomy 5: 1 - 22

Will you pray with me? Illuminating God, we invite you this morning to break forth yet more light and truth from your Holy Word. Amen.

Of all the stories in the Bible, this one is the one that nearly everyone knows, everyone, not just people who are part of the Christian or Jewish faiths.

The Ten Commandments. The Decalogue. The Ten C's. The Big Ten. These are the RULES that RULE.

(A powerpoint slide show was displayed. Due to copyright matters, we are not able to make it available.)

This story is embedded in our culture in ways no other Bible story is embedded, not even the Christmas story, which is pretty embedded.

The Christmas story is so embedded that people get upset when businesses recognize the “holidays” instead of recognizing “Christmas.” So before I get back to the Ten Commandments, let me just say this now, before the frenzy over what a business should say at Christmas goes full throttle.

Telling the story of Jesus and his endless love for us is the calling and responsibility of the church, the people who follow him. It is not the calling and responsibility of Walmart, Target, Macy's, Starbucks, or that little shop on Main Street that sells such nice things.

If the story of Jesus is not known, it is because the people who follow him aren't sharing it, not because shopkeepers big and small aren't sharing it. Shopkeepers have a purpose - to make a profit for their investors - and some people may practice shopping like it is a religion. But, commerce is not Christianity, and commerce has no calling to tell the story of Jesus. That's our calling.

Back to the Ten Commandments.

At their core, the Ten Commandments are a covenant between God and the Hebrew tribes who eventually became the Jewish people. The First Commandment says: “I am the LORD your God, the one who brought you out of slavery in Egypt into freedom. You shall have no other gods besides me.”

The First Commandment makes the entire set fundamentally a religious document. It commands allegiance to a particular God, the God who did something for the people, the God who gave them their freedom.

Now think about this for a moment. Commandment One acknowledges that we have a choice about who and what we can worship, that there is more than one god. In the ancient times, every tribe or people group had its own god. It was unusual to worship a god that was not somehow connected to your people group.

And religion was largely driven by this approach: “Please this god and this god will do things for you. Don’t please this god and this god will punish you.” This kind of thinking still pervades much thinking about God. We have to beg God to love us, so this thinking goes.

The covenant God makes with the Hebrew tribes at Mt. Sinai starts with what God has already done: God has set them free from slavery. That is reason enough to have no other gods besides this one. Always remember: a true God sets us free for life and love. A false god always demands a human sacrifice.

One of the ongoing controversies in American life is the role of the Ten Commandments in our general culture. More specifically, is a monument with the Ten Commandments a violation of the US Constitutional prohibition of the establishment of religion when that monument sits on public property, such as the grounds of a courthouse?

Supporters of such monuments maintain the Ten Commandments are the basis of our civil laws and should be honored as such. Opponents maintain the Ten Commandments are a religious expression, from a particular religious tradition, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and should be removed.

To the supporters, I say, you have a point, but murder and stealing and cheating on your spouse and lying on the witness stand were all wrong before the Ten Commandments were given by God to the Hebrew people. The commandments that deal with how we humans relate to each other are widely recognized and shared and certainly show up in our civil law. People who do not believe in God disapprove of murder, and approve of honoring our fathers and mothers. So it’s not like those things were a new idea on Mt. Sinai.

To the opponents, I say, you have a point. “I will be your God and you will be my people. You will not worship things created by your own hands. You will not attach my name to light and transient causes. (That’s what “wrongful use of God’s name” or “take God’s name in vain” means. It’s not about cursing. More in a moment.) Once a week, you will honor me by resting.” Those are distinctively religious statements.

To both of them, I say, having those monuments probably does our society no real harm. On the other hand, having them does not seem to be doing much good either. Most of these

monuments were built to help promote the 1956 film “The Ten Commandments.” Did you know that? This nationwide building of Ten Commandments monuments was part of a film promotion.

In the 60 years since these monuments were built, has compliance with them increased? Is there more murder and stealing and cheating on your spouse and lying on the witness stand than there was before they were built, or less? Legal or illegal, these monuments don’t seem to be very effective, do they?

While we tend to view the Ten Commandments as ten broad rules to guide our personal, individual behavior, as a whole, they are a description of God’s vision for the entire society.

When our covenant with our loving, freedom-giving God is alive, our relationships with each other will be different. We will see each other as equal recipients of God’s goodness, and we will treat each other that way. We will at minimum do not harm to each other. And if our covenant with God is strong and healthy, we will actively seek to bring good to each other’s lives.

The two versions of the Ten Commandments, the one from Exodus and the one from Deuteronomy, are very similar. Exodus is the more familiar one. The word “Deuteronomy” means “restatement of the Law.”

Both speak of clouds and fire and smoke on Mt. Sinai, hiding Moses as he and God spoke together. Both speak of how frightening that was to the people. Both speak of how the Covenant and the Law was written on two stone tablets by the very hand of God, although the stones show up in Exodus a little later.

To carry the two tablets safely through the wilderness, the people built a special box called the Ark of the Covenant. A movie was made about the Ark of the Covenant - “Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark.” Really, it is based on Exodus.

Today, in Jewish life, the place where the scrolls with the sacred text are stored is called an Ark. Our friends from Havurah lent us their Ark today. In a Jewish community with a building, the Ark is usually built into the center of the wall the congregation faces. An emblem of two tablets is always found in a Jewish place of worship. The two tablets are a more important symbol of Judaism than is the six-pointed Star of David.

I will not open the Ark to show you the scrolls inside. This is sacred to our Jewish neighbors and there is a ritual for opening it that I am not authorized or trained to conduct. Just as our Jewish neighbors would not preside at a Communion service.

The ancient Hebrew tribes understood the Ten Commandments, while engraved in stone, were about how they should live as a community. The Ark made it possible to take the two tablets with them wherever they went, symbolizing God was with them and the covenant was alive.

These days, tablet rarely means a piece of stone with writing on it. It is more likely to mean an electronic device.

In June, I was a man with no tablets. Then I changed cell phone carriers and the new one was so appreciative, they gave me a tablet. Then we bought the image displayer, also known as the big screen television and, with it, a tablet. I am now a man with two tablets.

We use the church one for church stuff only, and I don't take it with me anywhere. But the personal one . . . well, I can carry my whole life around with me! Every. Single. Detail. So that no matter where I am I can be connected to every. Single. Detail. Every. Single. Person. On the entire planet.

This is why I am a late adapter to technology. I do not want every single person on the entire planet with me at all times.

And now a metaphorical leap.

God does not intend for the Ten Commandments to be engraved in stone and put on monuments all over the land. God intends for the Ten Commandments to be engraved on our hearts so we carry these two tablets with us wherever we go. This is a Bible story we should know by heart: God has expectations of us about how we relate to God and to one another. When we know those expectations by heart, we can live them everywhere and with everyone.

I don't need batteries to carry these two tablets of God's expectations with me in my heart, although I can certainly feel energized by remembering God sets me free from all kinds of slavery.

The only monument God needs is our lives, lived faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly.

Amen.

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