
Thanksgiving: sharing gratitude
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Exodus 20:1-20 and Matthew 22:34-40

Have you ever heard anyone say - if only we followed the 10 commandments, our world would be a far better place. It's a tempting idea isn't it? To imagine that following a single short list of rules would lead to societal peace and harmony. And moreover, it's very tempting to imagine that someone else has already figured out this list of rules for us. We don't have to engage and think and create the rules ourselves. The hard work has already been done for us. It's a brilliant plan - if it works.

But since societies are constantly evolving, I have to wonder how practical that idea is. How are we to hear the 10 commandments today? How did you feel when you heard them a moment ago? I suppose the first issue would be: which version of the 10 commandments are we talking even about?

[image: how many versions? How many in OT? Is the named version the familiar version]

[ask - how many versions, and how many versions are named as such]

[image: 10 comms from exo 20]

I'm aware of 5 different versions. The version found in Exodus 20 which we just read and the version found in Deuteronomy 5 are quite similar. And they resemble what you probably think is meant by the term, "10 commandments".

Interestingly, although the commands are similar some of the motivations are different. For example, both versions command us to honour the sabbath. But in Exodus 20, the reason to honour the sabbath is because God created the heavens and the earth in 6 days. The sabbath for humans therefore represents the day that God rested after creation. In Deuteronomy 5, however, the requirement to honour the sabbath was to remember that God liberated the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.

[image: moses tablets]

So - what's a third version of the 10 commandments? I'm sure you remember the basic narrative of the mythical story we call "the Exodus". One piece of it is this: After leaving Egypt and wandering around for awhile, the people settled down for a little bit. Moses went up a mountain. And the people decided to have a party. They took some of the gold they had stolen from Egypt and created a statue of a calf. When Moses returned from the mountain, he brought with him the tablets on which 10 commandments were written.

[image: moses smashing tablets]

When Moses returned, he saw the people dancing around the golden calf. That action violated the commandments that Moses was carrying. Instead of realizing that the people had not yet heard the commandments and therefore could not violate them, Moses declared that the people were unfaithful. And in anger, Moses smashed the tablets. And so 2 chapters later, Moses goes and gets new tablets. Exodus 34 gives the text of these "replacement" tablets.

Exodus 34 begins with "The Lord said to Moses, 'Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke'." But the words that follow do not resemble the earlier commandments particularly well. For example, there is no general prohibition on either theft or murder. Instead, the text includes other concepts: "You shall worship no other god, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God", "You shall not make cast idols.", "Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God", and the most inexplicable commandment, "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk" The version of the 10 commandments in Exodus 34 is completely ignored because they just don't make a lot of sense. Incidentally, that version of the 10 commandments is the only version that - in the Bible - is actually named "the ten commandments".

[image: exodus 20]

[image: exodus 34]

So the Old Testament has 3 versions of the 10 commandments. And the version that actually called "the ten commandments" is bizarre. But if we consider only the "classic" version taken from Exodus 20, perhaps we can focus down on something we

can at least discuss.

[image: 10 comms courthouse]

Apparently, some people believe that our society's laws are based on the 10 commandments. For example, some people believe that the US legal system is based on the version of the commandments as found in Exodus 20. It is interesting to wonder how people could believe that, because the idea is absurd. The first amendment of the American constitution protects people's religious freedoms and freedom of speech. Those rights are clearly violated by the requirement within the 10 commandments to only worship 1 particular god. And moreover the requirement to not blaspheme against that god.

According to an article on rationalwiki.org, “at the very least, the first, second, third, and fourth Commandments would represent clear violations to both Article Nine of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. As well as Articles Eighteen and Nineteen of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

[image: monty python jehovah]

The command to not take God's name in vain is usually interpreted as a command to not engage in blasphemy. But how would that look in our society? Interestingly, in 2009 Ireland declared blasphemy to be a criminal act, with penalties up to 25,000 Euros. According to some commentators, infractions would include Athiests saying that God is imaginary. Or Jewish people saying that Jesus is not the messiah. Those laws were repealed in 2018.

Society as a whole may not care much about the commandments about God. But what about the commandments aimed at our social obligations? What about the more “reasonable” commandments?

[image: phone case that makes coffee]

Consider the commandment to not covet other people’s property. “Covet” just means wanting something that someone else has. It’s the basis of our capitalist economy. In modern terms, “covet” can be translated as, “I have a great phone, but I just saw Larry’s phone and it’s way cooler than mine so now I need a new phone.” I just don’t

understand this commandment at all. Some scholars have argued that wanting other people's stuff is ok, but it may lead to theft, or if the object of coveting is your neighbour's spouse, it may lead to adultery. But there are already separate commandments covering theft and adultery. Perhaps over coffee time we can discuss what principle this commandment is trying to address. What do you think it means to not covet?

[image: what part of thou shalt not kill do you not understand?]

What about the commandment to not kill? What does that mean? Some scholars believe that the Hebrew word for "kill" would be better translated as "kill without moral justification". But even then, who gets to decide what is justified? The victim or the aggressor? One difficulty with understanding this commandment is that the Old Testament is full of stories of killing and murder. Including stories where "God" specifically tells some people to kill some other people.

Numerous passages in the Bible depict "God" commanding the slaughter of "followers of other religions, non-believers, homosexuals, witches, adulterers, women who are not virgins on their wedding night, and anyone working on the sabbath." When we put it all together, it's hard to know what was meant by the commandment to not kill - unless it is simply a case of "do as I say, not as I do". And that violates the foundational principle of democracy we call the "Rule of Law".

[image: banned]

Some have argued that the commandment was given to prevent Hebrews killing other Hebrews. But just a few verses after Moses smashes the tablets, he orders the slaughter of his own people. Moses tells the sons of Levi "Put your sword on your side ... go back and forth from gate to gate and kill your brother, your friend and your neighbour ... and about three thousand people died." And when that was done, Moses declared that the slaughter was a great service to God.

So Moses broke the tablets shortly after they were created, and then he broke the commandments themselves right after that. If neither God or Moses could keep the commandments themselves, well, they just don't seem very useful, and not a model for society to follow.

[image: love god love others]

That's 3 versions. I will take a bit of a liberty and state that a fourth version of the 10 commandments comes from Jesus. Because there are a couple of occasions where Jesus encouraged people to follow "the commandments". And then Jesus spelled out what those commandments were. Our reading from Matthew today is an example of that, but there are other similar stories in the gospels too.

[image: book of the dead]

So that's 4 versions of the 10 commandments. A fifth version is what scholars believe to be the original text from which the biblical versions were plagiarized. The Egyptian "Book of the Dead" from about 1800 BC.

[image: love god love others]

I prefer the way that Jesus explains the commandments. Jesus (and other Jewish people in his day) said that all these elaborate rules - not only the 10 commandments but also the over 600 rules and restrictions in the Old Testament - are based on a single, simple premise. The premise that you should love God, love each other, and love yourself. Period. Or, the short version, which is 1 word. 1 Verb. Love!

[image: be thankful you're not a turkey]

I hope by now you are starting to wonder what this has to do with Thanksgiving. I'm glad you asked. Because if the weight of the commandments, and perhaps the entire biblical narratives, boil down to 1 command - which is to love, then I want to know what that looks like on Thanksgiving Sunday. What does "Love God, love other people, and love yourself" actually look like today? What might it look like?

I realize that some of us are having family gatherings for Thanksgiving, and some are not. I realize that some of the families that *are* gathering are doing it on a smaller scale than usual. The pandemic definitely impacts *how* we are celebrating Thanksgiving this year.

[image: thankful heart]

But while pandemic affects *how* we celebrate Thanksgiving, it does not need to change *why* we celebrate Thanksgiving. Yes, I realize that isn't so simple. I personally have heard a lot of people complaining throughout the pandemic. I can't do this. I can't do that. Or, to quote from Greta Thunberg last week, "Blah, blah blah". And there have

been lots of negatives for sure. But the pandemic has also given us a window into understanding what it is that we deeply care about. By being less busy - in the sense of not running around all the time - we are in a great position to reflect on what it is in life that we really care about. And what we deeply care about are perhaps things we can be grateful for. Or even if we are not feeling particularly reflective. If we simply pay attention to where we have been putting our time and energy, that shows us what we care about. We have let go of some things. And we have adapted and changed to sustain other things. And clearly, the things we have chosen to sustain are the things that matter to us.

[image: food bank]

Personally I find it hard to separate the changes in my own life due to the pandemic from the changes due to moving to Brantford, since those events were only 6 weeks apart. My move - and the pandemic combined - has sort of forced me to make the effort to maintain some relationships while allowing other relationships to wither. And in that process, I have come to realize more clearly the value of those relationships that I have chosen to put my energy into. Could I have figured this out without the pandemic, or without moving here? Likely. But I'll bet it would not have happened at all. The pandemic has brought into sharper focus what it is in life that we care about.

And whatever we care about presumably we are grateful for. Thanksgiving is a great opportunity to share that gratitude with other.

What are you grateful for? And how do you express it? If you walked down the street this afternoon would passers-by on the street know that you feel grateful? How would they know?

One of the best ways to look grateful is to share that gratitude. That can be done in lots of ways. Perhaps with a phone call. Perhaps with a text or a card. Perhaps with an offer to share a meal. Perhaps with a donation to a local food bank.

By some strange quirk of human nature, it turns out that the more we express our gratitude, the more grateful we become, and the more we enjoy life. Who knew?

Embrace the commandment - and the gift - of love. It's in you to give.

Amen.