

# SERMON

by Rev. Emily Chapman

October 2, 2011

*(Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A)*

8:30 a.m. Service of Word and Table

World Communion Sunday



## ST. PAUL'S

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**Lectionary Texts:** Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; and Matthew 21:33-46

## **Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20**

*Then God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup>I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>7</sup>You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. <sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work.*

*<sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. <sup>13</sup>You shall not murder. <sup>14</sup>You shall not commit adultery. <sup>15</sup>You shall not steal. <sup>16</sup>You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. <sup>17</sup>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.*

*<sup>18</sup>When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, <sup>19</sup>and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die."*

*<sup>20</sup>Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."*

I have to admit that one of my most frequent sources of news these days is the Comedy Central news hour. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are thought to be the primary news source of a whole generation of people. One of my favorite parts of the *Colbert Report* is a segment he does called "Better Know a District" in which he profiles a congressional district and, ideally, interviews that representative. He is slowly working his way through all 435 districts.

One of my all-time favorites is when he interviewed a representative from Georgia who is widely known to be a vocal advocate for the display of the 10 Commandments in public buildings. Colbert kept pressing the congressman for other places besides courthouses....like, maybe a church or a synagogue. But the congressman kept talking about courthouses and public buildings. Finally Colbert went for the kill and asked, “What are the 10 Commandments?”

You’ll be shocked to know, the congressman was stumped. He stammered his way through two or three, and it was a fairly embarrassing performance after all that talk about how important they were. But it was an enlightening showing of how many people, including church people, often regard the 10 Commandments as a as an old list of rules intended to govern personal conduct. As rules, they are mostly to restrict us from things we shouldn’t do. They are meant to protect us from one another in a dangerous, unpredictable world. They are to keep us in line.

By that interpretation, I suppose it could make sense to tack them up in public buildings, separated from their biblical context and ripped from their story. For Israel, the law given at Mount Sinai comes as gift, as a liberating word that makes it possible for the covenant people to flourish in their life together. They are not meant to be restrictive but life-giving, life-giving for everyone. They weren’t just meant to govern one’s individual life but the life of the whole community.

It is a good text for us to read today as we mark World Communion Sunday. These words are meant to govern life together, to give life to everyone and allow all people to thrive. This is a day when we remember especially something we are supposed to remember all the time – that we are part of something much greater than ourselves. So it is a good time to remember these 10 Commandments that remind us how to live together.

Perhaps the best sermon I have ever heard on the 10 Commandments was the one that named them as a means of dismantling the fear that nearly all people everywhere share that keeps us from remembering that we are a part of one another – that make us wish sometimes we did not share communion with the whole world. That is the fear that there is somehow not enough for everyone. It’s what makes us

self-protective and anxious about everything, what makes us work ourselves to death and cling to things we don't need. There might not be enough. I suppose it's just as well since our economy depends on all of us thinking that we need just a little bit more. But the commandments completely tear this fear apart.

Take a look at the eighth commandment — you shall not steal. I'm not talking about the kind of stealing that comes out of desperation, like stealing to feed your children, or even about breaking in and stealing, because I am guessing we all know that's bad. I'm really thinking of the kind of attitude that says it doesn't matter if I fudge a little on my expense account because after all it's a big company and they don't pay me enough anyway, or on my taxes, because I think they are too high. Or that takes credit for something I didn't create or an idea that wasn't mine, because I need to make myself look good to get to where I want to be.

God says “you shall not steal.”

Or the fourth commandment that requires Sabbath keeping. This one gets me. Because it dismantles the idea a lot of us have that there isn't enough time. Ours is a culture that works hard and demands productivity. There is a lot of work to be done, and I have to do it. People are counting on me, and there is not enough time, but I just might pull it off. I can't stop, can't slow down while there is still work to do. Breaking this commandment is not all that different than saying there is only one savior of the world and that's me. I can't stop until I save the world, or at least my company or my family or my career.

But God says “you shall rest.”

What about the seventh commandment. You shall not commit adultery. Most of us know that adultery is usually more of a symptom than a cause, but the root of it is the same as the others — one is not enough. Marriage is the great proclamation that one is plenty, is all you need forever. Adultery says I need more.

God says, “you shall not commit adultery.” One is enough.

The third commandment gets me, too. You shall not make wrong use of the Lord's name. It's so easy...when a football game gets really good or really bad, or you trip over your own two feet, or you have been sitting on the phone listening to a

voice say “Your call is very important to us” for the last 45 minutes. All other language seems to miss the mark for our feelings, so we invoke God’s name, making something given to us as holy completely trivial. We do the same thing when we exaggerate to make a point. We are saying that the truth is not enough, we need a little more. Do not use the name of God to express your disdain for the referee, or to make the story you are telling more interesting than it is.

You shall not make wrong use of the Lord’s name.

And then of course there is the second commandment – do not make for yourself an idol. This is the one that says God is not enough. This is the one that says if God does not seem near enough I’ll make my own...maybe it’ll be a car, or a perfectly decorated house, or a brilliant career, or a scale that always says the right weight. This is the one that really gets at the heart of the problem. This ever-present anxiety that we don’t have enough – not enough stuff, not enough time, not enough love all point to real issue...we don’t feel that we have enough God. For all the prayers we pray and the hymns we sing in this place, God is still not enough.

That’s why the moment we hear these commandments matters so much. Israel has been in the wilderness for a while. Long enough that they think they might have been better off in Egypt. In this moment, God says “I am the Lord your God.”

Remember me? I am the one who brought you out of Egypt, delivered you from slavery, who fed you in the wilderness and brought water from a rock when you got thirsty. But you still fall into thinking that I am not enough...so you start to look for other gods or for more stuff...your thoughts still wander back to Egypt and you think that maybe being a slave is not so bad. Someday you’ll realize that I am more than enough, that I have loved you and stayed with you through all kinds of betrayal, that I have given you all you need, that I have set you free, that I want to give you a life beyond your imagining.

In the meantime though, here are some rules to help you remember what really matters. They will govern not just your life, but the life of all my people together. They are gifts for you, not burdens. They will help you remember your freedom. They will challenge your imagination to realize that I am the Lord your God

and I am more than enough. So leave your fear and anxiety. I am enough. I will be with you.