

**Sermon for First Lutheran Church, Aitkin, Minnesota---June 2 and 3, 2018**

**Exodus 20:1-11**

Pastor Douglas Larson

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

I've been told that the Ten Commandments are really about ten donuts. Yes, donuts, so I thought I would bring a donut to eat as I tell you about them. I probably should have brought a donut for each of you too, but I didn't. But I have to tell you, this donut is good and I like the idea of God wanting us to eat donuts. Still, I have a gnawing doubt that the Ten Commandments aren't really about donuts.

Maybe someone got mixed up in the words and the Ten Commandments are really about ten "do not's". See they sound alike so maybe the Ten Commandments are about ten "do not's" or ten "don't's"! After all, it seems the Ten Commandments are about ten don'ts—don't have other gods, don't take God's name in vain, don't forget God's day, don't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie or covet.

But I still have a gnawing doubt that the Ten Commandments aren't really about donuts, do-nots or don'ts. It looks that way from how our text starts today, but we are starting at verse 3 and not verse one in this chapter. We are missing two essential verses. Look what happens when we go back to the first two verses: "Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

When we start there, the Ten Commandments take on a totally different view. It isn't about donuts, or do-nots or don'ts but about the Lord God freeing the Israelites from a life of slavery. These commandments are based on a tremendous act of God liberating God's people from a life of drudgery and hopelessness. God has stepped into history to set God's people free to a new life, a life of hope with the Lord. The commandments are then a set of rules to help them live to the fullest in this relationship with God and with others.

Think about why we tell children not to run with scissors? Because we don't want them to live with the consequences of getting hurt by the scissors. Or why do we have a rule to drive on the right side of the road? Because we know what will happen if we drive on both sides, as sometimes happens. So we have rules that help our lives have order and make it better for all. So God, having stepped into history to set God's people free, also wants them to live, to have real life in this new time.

3,200 years ago the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. But before that they had been honored guests because of Joseph and what he had done. Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob. But his older brothers had sold him into slavery and he ends up in Egypt. There, in a prison, he is asked by the Pharaoh of Egypt to interpret two dreams. None of the Pharaoh's advisors could interpret them. Joseph said that the dreams of seven fat cows

and seven full heads of grain followed by seven skinny cows and seven empty heads, but eating the previous ones, meant there would be seven bumper crops followed by seven years of famine. The Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of planning for this and out of gratitude invites Joseph's family to come down to Egypt and live in honor. This went on for a couple hundred years.

However, in Exodus 1:8, we are told that a new Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph and what he had done. Or maybe he didn't care and instead saw the Israelites (or Hebrews as they were known then) as threats. So they were enslaved and forced to work building cities for the Pharaoh. They were responsible for making bricks and we are told their life was very harsh.

Now, I have no real idea of what it is like to be a slave. I get bits and pieces of what it was like for the African-Americans in our country who were taken from their land, homes and communities in Africa, brought across the sea, chained, beaten, worked and moved around as the owners saw fit, often arranging marriages, separating families and children from their parents as if they had no feelings or rights. That had to be just awful. That history still affects Blacks in our country and us of other colors.

Likewise the life of the Israelites must have been hard, for the Pharaoh worked them seven days a week. In an effort to stop the population, the Pharaoh told the midwives who attended the birth of Hebrew women, that if a baby boy was born they were to kill them and tell the mother the baby was born dead. When Moses would come back to tell the Pharaoh to let God's people go, the Pharaoh made life even tougher for the slaves, making them not only make bricks but also now find the straw for the bricks with no extra time or food.

So the Israelite slaves cried out to God and God heard them. God, long story short, spoke to Moses, a Hebrew or Israelite, who had been spared at birth, raised by a princess of Pharaoh in the palace, who one day saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite, killed him and soon had to run to the desert for safety. Moses became a shepherd for the second forty years of his life. One day he saw a bush that was burning but not being consumed and God called to him and told him to go back to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of the land.

God worked to make this departure happen with the plagues and the angel of death passing through the land of Egypt, killing the first-born of all that did not have the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. Now Moses has led the Israelites back to Mount Sinai to meet the Lord. Here, in verses one and two, God sets the stage for what God is going to give the Israelites: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. By this the Lord God is telling them that God's purpose was to give them life, freedom, a new way of living. The Ten Commandments are rules given so that they could have life, real life in this new time.

With the foundation of God freeing the people, God gives the first commandment not to have other gods before, or beside or in the presence of the Lord God. What does a god do for us? Martin Luther said that a god is that to which we look for the source of all

good in life and in which to take refuge in times of distress. Remember says God, I brought you out of the land of slavery; I bore you out as if on eagle's wings. Therefore, anything less than me will not bring you life in the true sense. Yes, you can make idols of stone or wood, or you can make possessions, money, popularity, power, control be the most important thing to you—your god. But it will not give you life, no matter how much you deceive yourself!

As Christians, coming out of the Jewish tradition we acknowledge there is only one god. In Egypt there were many gods, Amen, Ra and even the Pharaoh considered to be gods. In Greek and Roman cultures, there are many, many gods. But with this first commandment God is telling us that although we may try these other things as god and think they may do the trick for us, in the quiet times of our life, we will know they are empty. So don't waste your time on them, says the Lord. I want you to have a better life than that.

The second commandment tells us not to take the name of the Lord in vain. This means to not use God's name as a tool for which it is not designed or to use it in pointless ways. God's name is a means to call upon the Lord and give God praise. To use it to swear or attack others or like a magic amulet is a waste of time, pointless. One of my dad's sisters came to visit when I was in my early teenage years. For the entire time of a week with various family members, she begin every statement, literally every statement this way, "My God it was such a beautiful day. My God, I told my kids to clean their rooms...." And so forth. Trying to sound important or look good. Don't waste your time doing that, says the Lord or try to sound mean by using my name to damn people or things. I want a better life for you than that, says the Lord.

In the third commandment God tells us to take a rest every seven days. As slaves the Israelites didn't have a day off. Parents know what it is like the first year of a baby when you are just plain tired all the time, exhausted. Americans are proud of how hard we work and how many hours we work. We tend to be proud that we don't take much vacation and think others should do the same. It's said you can't burn a candle on both ends. But in one of the Groucho Marx movies, Groucho chides a student for sleeping in class right under his nose with that statement. The next scene is Harpo Marx, the student pulling a candle out from under his coat, burning on both ends. So it can be done but the candle burns down twice as fast.

God wants us to rest, be renewed and get a break from the work we do. We need to sleep to refresh and revitalize both our body and brain. God's command is so we can have a better life in this new age that God calls us to. We need to shift gears to be truly alive. All work and no play truly makes Jack a dull boy. Martin Luther said we need to rest and also to take time to hear God on this day of rest. So the God who called the Israelites out of slavery calls us away from slavery in our daily life. We need to rest for both our physical and spiritual life.

God says to us today: I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of slavery. In Jesus Christ we have been freed from the power of sin, death and the devil. In Holy

Baptism we are set free from these powers of slavery to live as God's people in a new age with God as the center of our life and therefore the center of our happiness. Jesus said in John 10:10, I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly. In Revelation 21:1-5, we hear that God is moving to the end of all that enslaves us and will stand in triumph at the end of time. At His home town synagogue, Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 and proclaims, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the afflicted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to those in prison and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The Ten Commandments are God's rules given to help us live in this new relationship with God as our God. Amen.