

There is currently a court case in Oklahoma City about the constitutionality of having a granite monument engraved with the Ten Commandments on the grounds of the state capitol. The people filing the lawsuit claim that this is a violation of the separation of church and state. But the legislator who donated the monument maintains that the Ten Commandments are not only the central moral teaching of Judaism and Christianity, but are the foundation of law in Western society and therefore appropriate at the capitol, giving historical context in this place where current laws are debated and enacted. The legislator has many who applaud his action, people who see the Commandments to be a means of calling America back to basic morality, a universally valid code of conduct, those ethical absolutes upon which all people of good will can agree.

While we can understand the good intentions of the legislator in the face of what at times seems to be moral chaos, upon a little reflection we may come to the conclusion that posting the Ten Commandments on the grounds of a state capitol is a misuse of the commandments. Ripping the Commandments out of their context, they are no longer the Ten Commandments of the LORD God who appeared to Abraham and Moses, the God whom Christians worship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Recall the context in which the commandments were given. It's about 1250 B.C. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, collectively known by Jacob's other name as "the people of Israel", were living in Egypt and had been subjected as slaves and not allowed to leave. Moses, the former prince of Egypt is living in exile in the wilderness, having fled Egypt for murdering a soldier. While Moses is tending his sheep, minding his own business, a bush bursts into flame and he hears a voice: "*I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land.*" (Ex. 3:7-8)

This God who addresses Moses is no deistic "unmoved mover", as some conceive of God, one who takes no interest in the lives of the human community he created. Here is a God who hears, intrudes, acts, and calls. God says to Moses, "I am going to deliver my people and guess who is going to help me?" Moses gulps and says, "Before I answer, could I have a hint?" God says "No need for a hint. I'll give you the answer: YOU are going to lead my people back to the Promised Land." Moses protests. God insists. Moses is told to go to Pharaoh and tell the most powerful man on earth to let the Israelites go. Why should Pharaoh let them go? Is it because God is against slavery? We can be pretty confident that God is against slavery, but that is not the reason God gives for sending Moses to Pharaoh. The reason God gives for demanding freedom from Egyptian slavery is so that the Israelites might go out into the wilderness to sacrifice, to worship the LORD God. (3:18)

The hard-hearted Pharaoh resists. It's a tight labor market and cheap labor is hard to find. He's not about to simply let his slave labor take off in the middle of a construction project. What follows are negotiations, confrontations, frogs, plagues, gnats, and much death. Finally Pharaoh relents, saying, "*Enough! Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone.*" (12:32) The people of Israel hasten toward the desert. There, at last, they are liberated. They are free!

Well, not quite. The Israelites have been liberated from slavery in order to worship in the wilderness. But it has been so long since anyone has worshiped the true God, they have forgotten how. Is the liturgy of the LORD God of Israel high church or low? Should incense be used? What about vestments for the priests? Apparently to clarify these questions, Exodus says "The LORD summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up." (19:20) There the LORD opens the conversation by reminding Moses of what he has done for the people of Israel and thereby indicates who this God is: "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.*"

This is a not-so-gentle way of reminding Israel, "I paid dearly for you. You have been brought out of slavery, not in order to be free to do whatever you please, but rather in order that you might more fully belong to me, that you might worship me."

How are they to worship? Here begins the enumeration of the commandments: Don't have idols. Don't steal. Don't have sex with other people's spouses. Don't slander or lie about others.

Moses must surely be thinking, "This doesn't sound like any worship service I've ever attended!"

But this God, the LORD God, has a peculiar notion of worship, in comparison with other gods. Some gods are into war, or sex, or gold. But here is a God who wants a holy people, a community where everyone is clergy, who says to Moses, "*Tell the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles'*

wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possessions out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” (19:3-6)

The important word here is *therefore*. Because Israel has been saved by God, *therefore* this people is to be a nation of priests. When Exodus says that Israel is to be a “holy nation,” it means a people set apart for a special purpose. When it says “priests,” it means that Israel exists for sake of the whole world, to intercede, to make sacrifice, and to live in such a way in obedience to the commandments that people will say to themselves “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” (Deut. 4:6)

It is true that the Ten Commandments are given for all humankind, but the way we discover that is by seeing their embodiment in the people of Israel and the church. We live by the commandments as a way of worshiping the true God. Have you ever considered that keeping the commandments is a way to worship God? When we worship the LORD God in this way, we demonstrate to the world the sort of people God is able to produce. Our little lives are caught up in the great purposes of God for the world. We, for whom lying, deceit, and falsehood come all too naturally, are transformed by our obedience to the commandments into a people of the truth.

We, who were slaves, (“in bondage to sin” as we say in our confession) have become free. But that does not mean that we are free from all attachments, free to “do our own thing.” As an old Jewish prayer puts it, “We were freed from being slaves to Pharaoh so that we might become slaves to Torah, the Law.”

Contrary to the good intentions of the legislator in Oklahoma, the purpose of the commandments is not to serve as ethical guidelines for humanity in general. The commandments are a countercultural way of life for people who know who they are and whose they are. Their function is not to keep American culture running smoothly, but rather to produce people who are, in our daily lives, a sign that God has not left the world to its own devices. We have the Commandments because we have been delivered and redeemed by God. At the same time, we are delivered and redeemed by God because we have the commandments. The commandments are both a gracious reminder of who we are and an abrasive prod or goad to be who we ought to be.

But before the Ten Commandments are about us, they are primarily about the LORD God. We know someone by the way that person speaks. We know the true and living God because this God has refused to stay aloof and unconcerned. The LORD God could have stayed on Mount Sinai, hidden in the clouds, silent. Instead, the LORD God called Moses to him and had him write down what would please God. Our relentlessly self-revealing God has spoken “ten words” to us and is thereby known to us. Prior to the words, and behind each of them, is the LORD God – a God who does not leave us alone to stumble aimlessly in the wilderness or in Plymouth but graciously gives us the law “for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive”. (Deut 6:24) The sort of God who would give us the commandments is also the God who would give us Jesus.

The Ten Commandments are an affirmation that God has not done everything that needs doing in this world but has left plenty for us to do as obedient and faithful people. God, having been creative, faithful, and just, now gives us the means to be creative, faithful, and just. God has chosen us and calls us to do what needs to be done in this world. Whenever we are obedient, it’s called worship. Where we work Monday through Friday becomes an altar and we get to be the world’s priests.

Martin Luther wrote in his Large Catechism, “Anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scriptures.” That’s quite a claim, but it is an understandable claim if we recognize that the Commandments are not simply a set of ethical rules, but are a gift from a loving God whose significance is discovered not by focusing on the commandments themselves, but upon the God who gives them.

*Adapted from “Bending Our Lives Toward God”, a sermon by William Willimon*