

***Entrusted to Us***

Last week I did something that I'd never done before in worship, at least not that I could recall, and that was to base my sermon on a psalm. Today, by contrast, I'm going to do something that I have done before, in fact, I have done on several occasions, and that is to begin my sermon with a test. A test for you. For this exercise, you are welcome to scribble your answers on the cover of your worship bulletin, or if you'd prefer, you can just use your ten fingers, which happens to be exactly how many you'll need for this test. Because what I want you to do now is to make a list of the Ten Commandments, and if you can put them in correct order, you'll get extra credit.

Now while you're coming up with your list, let me say a few words about the Ten Commandments, a term by the way that is only used one time in all of scripture. What we call the Ten Commandments is just a small portion of the much larger number of commandments given to Moses atop Mt. Sinai, and they are all part of the deal, or the covenant, that God is making with Israel on that occasion. In fact, the commandments are the conditions that God places on Israel for having anointed them to be God's own people. In other words, the commandments lay out what God expects out of God's people. You can't be God's people and just act any old way you'd like. No, God's people are held to a higher standard, and that higher standard is what we call the Ten Commandments (along with the other commandments given to Moses).

You have your list? In Exodus, the list of the commandments, and not just the ten but all of them, begins with the words, "I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage..." In a very real sense, that is the preface to every single one of the commandments. I brought you out of Egypt, therefore, #1, no other gods. #2, no idols, or to use the old term, no graven images. #3, no trivial or demeaning use of God's name. #4, remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. #5—hold this one, and we'll come back to it in just a moment.

#6, no murder. #7, no adultery. #8, no stealing. #9, no lying, especially about your neighbor. And #10, no envy of what belongs to your neighbor. You will note that the first four—the so-called first table of the law—all deal with God, while the final five—the second table of the law—all deal with one's neighbors, fellow human beings, and right in the middle is #5, which is "honor your father and mother," your parents being kind of half way between God and your neighbor. What is more, #5 is the only one of the commandments that contains the promise of a blessing if obeyed, that promise being that you may live a long life in the land that God has given you, a promise quite specific to the people to whom these laws were given, the people of Israel, who were on their way at that time to the aforementioned land, the so-called Promised Land. You will live a long time in that land if you honor your father and mother.

This fifth commandment is a particularly clear reminder that these laws, like all the commandments found in Exodus, are strongly contextual. These laws, and most of all the Ten Commandments, are not just broad guidelines given to all people for the general wellbeing. God did not give these commandments to the Egyptians or to the Syrians or to any of the other people who lived in that region. God gave them to the Israelites, after having freed them from their oppression in Egypt, and to prepare them for life in the land to which they were then traveling

through the wilderness, that is, for life in the Promised Land. The test of Israel's faithfulness to God, the test of their truly being "God's people," would be how well they kept these commandments, these rules for life in the Promised Land.

All of which suggests to me that this fifth commandment, the command to "honor your father and mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" is more important than we might be inclined to think. That far from being just another commandment on the order of "you shall not steal," this commandment is actually the hinge that ties the commandments together into a whole. And because it does play this very important role, in addition to this being a covenant between God and the people of Israel, it is also a covenant between generations, between parents and children.

Just as these commandments are not broad guidelines intended for everyone, neither is this covenant between just any generations, any parents and their children. Of course, there is always something of a covenant between generations, in that each generation does give way to the next, passing on to a younger generation that which had belonged to their elders. Very often that covenant is a formal document called a will. You probably all have one, or you should. Your will, just like this covenant, establishes the conditions under which one's possessions will be passed down to the next generation.

But here in Exodus, and even more so in Deuteronomy, where the Ten Commandments are repeated, there is far more to this covenant between generations than just that. There's a particular factor in their specific situation that very much colors this covenant. That is the fact, too often overlooked, that those who had endured bondage in Egypt and then the long and arduous journey through the wilderness, and those who would one day cross over into the Promised Land, that land famously flowing with milk and honey, were two different generations. One generation that had paid the price, the other that would reap the blessing. That is why that second generation, the younger generation, was expected to honor those who had gone before them. Not just because everyone should honor your father and mother, though that's true, but because their fathers and their mothers had borne the burden that had sustained the dream of God's people through the long years of wandering. That fact was never to be forgotten.

Which is why it was incumbent upon that new generation to sustain that dream by keeping the commandments and thereby building a just and righteous society befitting their being God's people. That society that would be the ultimate memorial to their parents' generation, something that would truly honor their fathers and mothers. Not to do so would be the first misstep down what would be a very slippery slope. You forget your parents who died out there in the wilderness so that you might live in the Promised Land, and it's only a matter of time before you forget who it was that brought you up out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, in the first place. Then start to think that this Promised Land and all its bounty were all your doing. In fact, disobey that fifth commandment, and pretty soon, you won't be God's people at all anymore. You'll be just like everyone else, and that older generation would have suffered and died in vain.

So what's all this got to do with us? If the Ten Commandments were directed not just to the Israelites, but to the Israelites at a certain point in their history, what about us? Do these commandments really apply to us at all, I mean to anything like the extent they did to those ancient Israelites? Well, first of all, the answer is yes, they do apply to us, and not merely as useful guidelines of the sort that apply to everyone. They apply to us because, thanks be to God, we're God's people, too, redeemed from our bondage by the life, death and resurrection of God's

only son. So God expects more out of us, just as God expected more out of the Israelites, and for the same reason. We're God's people.

But they also apply to us in a way that has particular relevance here at First Church. Because in some pretty important ways, we're in a position very much like that of that generation who first entered the Promised Land. Because like them, it was those who have gone before us who did the heavy lifting here, and we who are reaping the benefits, a fact of which we should all be mindful every single time we enter this building, a house of worship which we did not build, which we could not even dream of building. But how many times do we enter this building and say thanks to those who did build it now almost 150 years ago. Not many, I suspect.

But it's not just the building, as important a part of who we are as this building truly is. Even more, though, it's the dream that lay behind this building, the dream of which this building is a symbol. The dream of a society where people—even dissenters like Presbyterians—were free to worship without having to seek the approval of the governing authorities. The dream—they declared—of a nation founded upon the principle that all were created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. A dream they defended first against all odds, and then later fought to make a reality in the freedom of all people, and not just some. A dream of which this building became a memorial, having been constructed in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War.

Yesterday, we celebrated the 300th anniversary of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, the first American presbytery organized here in the year 1717. Here, not just in Philadelphia, but right *here!* That first meeting took place in Old Buttonwood. Not Old Buttonwood Hall, the *original* Old Buttonwood, the first home of this congregation. It is that dream, their dream, that continues today, a dream now entrusted to us.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,  
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*