

March 8, 2015, 3rd Sunday in Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Exodus 20:1-17

Laying Down the Law

Some people here may have seen Charlton Heston's most famous movie, an epic, Biblical story of pharaohs, plagues, and escape from slavery in Egypt. On the poster for this movie, Heston, who plays the main character (which you will have guessed is Moses), has flowing white hair and a full beard, and impressively muscled biceps and triceps. High above his head, his chiseled arms hold two tablets. (For the younger ones here, I should clarify that the tablets he holds are not computers. This Moses needs muscles because the two tablets are made of stone.) The movie, of course, is *The Ten Commandments*. We heard them in our first reading today, from the book of Exodus. (Thank you Girl Scouts, for your part in worship today and Wednesdays. Thank you for the ways that you and your leaders are a ministry expression of this congregation.)

Another cinematic take on this scene comes from Mel Brooks, *The History of the World Part I*, another movie with which some of you may be familiar. (Confirmation students will remember seeing this.) In this version of this scene about the Ten Commandments, Moses is not so buff. Nor does he have quite the same grip on the tablets. This Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai (in this version he is holding three tablets) and announces, "Hear me, Oh hear me, All pay heed. The Lord has given unto you these 15 ..." and then he drops a tablet, which smashes. Moses says, "10, these 10 Commandments!"

Mel Brooks isn't the only one to play with the numbers. It turns out there are slightly different numbering systems for the commandments depending upon one's religious tradition. There's the numbering system used by Catholic/Lutheran/Orthodox churches, or there's the number system used by Anglican/Other Protestants. There are still just ten commandments, but they get arranged slightly differently, depending upon how you divvy up the ones about idol worship and other gods, and coveting house and spouse etc. Now I suspect that that's already quite a bit more on the numbering of the commandments than you care for, but if, like me, you find such details interesting, you can look it up on a tablet computer and compare the numerical systems.

But whatever way you number them, whether they are written in stone or accessed on your computer, when we talk about the tablets of the law, we're not so much talking about what they're written on as what they are about. When we talk about two tablets of the Law, we're talking about the way the Ten Commandments have two sections, two areas of address, two foci.

First, there are the commandments about God: No other Gods, God's name, God's day. You could think of this tablet as the one having to do with our up and down, our vertical relationship—our relationship with God. Then there are the commandments about parents, murder, adultery, stealing, truthfulness, and coveting, coveting, coveting... This tablet has to do with our relationship with others people, our side-to-side, or horizontal relationships. Two tablets, two directions, two kinds of relationships. In the gospels, Jesus famously sums up these two tablets in this way: First tablet: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Second tablet: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Two tablets, two directions to love.

It may be easy to miss this emphasis on love—love, which is the absolute and positive summary of the law, because of all those "you shall nots." You shall not do this. You shall not do that. It can sound, well, negative. Accordingly, I think the law sometimes gets a bad rap.

Maybe a bit like Lent does. This church season we're now in can seem like a downer. All those hymns in minor keys. All those things that you are giving up. All this talk about death. If that's all there is to Lent, then ugh!

The law can sound like that, too—if you think of the law as a list of all the things you can't do, or if the law conjures up images of God as an angry disciplinarian, an irate parent, listing off all the things that are forbidden, all possible failures, and finishing it all off with sweeping—no—never-ending punishment!

Of course, that's not good parenting. And that's not what God is like—though sometimes I think we personify God in that way, in a way that is familiar, as a lousy parent. As a sometime lousy parent myself, I can identify with that image—but it does a great disservice to God. God is not Our Father in that way. Instead, familial language for God is a way of expressing what God is like in that God is relational. God wants to have a relationship with us, and God wants us to have good relationships with one another. That's why God gives us the law, to guide us in good relationships. Numerical lists can help with that.

Some parents here at church looked at one such list this past fall as we read a parenting book together. It happened to be a book that was guided by Jewish wisdom. The chapter on discipline said: when your child misbehaves, do this: 1) Wait till you can speak calmly and directly to the child. 2) Touch the child, describing specific unacceptable behavior, and keep it short. 3) Describe fitting and reasonable consequences and an opportunity for amends. 4) Remind your child of your love.

I'm struck by the similarities with that list and the Ten Commandments. Like a parent, who waits and speaks directly, the Ten Commandments 1) come after some waiting, after the people come to a place where God can speak directly with them. Then, 2) God reminds them of their relationship. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Then 3) God describes specific behavior, and keeps it short: "You shall not kill," "You shall not steal." As the book of Exodus continues, God offers consequences and opportunities for amends. Finally, 4) As the Bible continues, God continues to remind people of their relationship.

Relationship comes first; relationship is the framework for the law. In fact, in the Jewish numbering system (one more numerical detail) in the Jewish numeration of the Ten Commandments, the first commandment is simply a statement, a relational statement: Commandment number 1) "I am the Lord your God."

Love is why God lays down the law, love is why we have Lent, a season which culminates in this statement by God in Jesus: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for his friends." In the cross, the tablets of the law come together, the vertical, and the horizontal, a statement of God's absolute, positive, greatest commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you."