

October 20, 2013

TEN COMMANDMENTS

Faithful Marriage: Plan B?

1 Corinthians 7:10-16; Matthew 19:1-12

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In our sermons through the fall we are looking together at the Ten Commandments, the Commandments given by God through Moses to his ancient people Israel as they escape from slavery in Egypt and were heading on their way to the land that God had promised them. They were in the middle of nowhere, between slavery and the land that they had been promised, and God spoke to them, saying, “I have rules for you, rules of the game by which you are to live the game of life.” These are not rules given by God in order to take away our joy, but to help us to know how to live with one another in the best way possible – the way in which we can give glory to God and find our greatest joy and fulfillment in life.

These are the rules given by God to Moses in what we call the Ten Commandments. They are recorded for us in Holy Scripture in the 20th Chapter of Exodus and the 5th Chapter of Deuteronomy. They are embraced by our Lord Jesus Christ who expounds upon them in large part in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5,6,7), and we have them affirmed as well for us in the pages of the New Testament in the days of the early church.

So far in our series we’ve looked at four of these Commandments.

We’ve looked at the first two Commandments which focus our attention on God;

- *Where God is in our life*: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Is God number one? If not sort out your priorities.
- *And who God is in our lives*: “Make no idols.” This commandment is not just about hand carved idols but about the way in which we choose to imagine God with our minds. What’s the image of God that we carry in our minds? Do we just think of God the way we want to think of God? Or do we allow Jesus Christ to shape the way we think of God, constantly challenging our image of God, our worship of God? The New Testament says that “*He is the image of the invisible God*” (Colossians 1:15). He is the idol, as it were, before whom we are legitimately to bow down and through whom a picture of God is to be created and recreated in our minds.

So we looked at those first two commandments and then we looked at the sixth Commandment, which is about murder: “You shall not commit murder.” Jesus says it’s not just about actual murder, but it’s also about our relationships with other people (Matthew 5:21-26) – those relationships which are hard or strained, when sometimes we want to “kill” somebody with our looks, with anger that’s burning within us. Indeed, Jesus emphasized

that this Commandment is not just about the absence of ill will, but about the positive need for reconciliation; not just our passion not to destroy relationships or others, but to bring healing and wholeness. And he longs to help us in this path even though this can be hard indeed.

And then last Sunday we began to look at the seventh Commandment, which says quite simply, “You shall not commit adultery.” In the world of ancient Israel as well as in our Presbyterian tradition we have always understood this Commandment not merely as a Commandment for those in marriage “if you are in a marriage, don’t commit adultery”), but as a commandment which brings the whole realm of sexuality into the sphere of God’s interest.

- God is interested in all of our lives not just in part of our lives.
- The God of the Bible is not just interested in our souls but in our bodies and our souls.
- The God of the Bible is not just the creator of the spiritual universe but of the physical universe as well.
- The God of the Bible is the God who raised Jesus from the dead not merely in the spirit (which would be an idea acceptable to the Greek philosophers), but in the body as well – a true Hebrew idea: the God of the Bible is the God who creates “stuff and matter” and “flesh and blood” and wants us to embrace all of this in our understanding of how we are to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.
 - There is always a temptation in religion to split the two apart and say religion’s just about the spirit – forget the body. But Hebrew faith and Christian faith says we cannot do that. They are bound inescapably together by our creating and redeeming God.

So we found ourselves beginning to look at this seventh commandment last Sunday, at the words of this God who says to us “we need to get *all of our lives, every dimension*, in order before God if we’re to experience our greatest joy, our greatest fulfillment, our greatest effectiveness in his service.”

We began to look at this last Sunday by describing the whole volume of issues that there are in our society today relating to sexuality, just to see that this is an enormous part of our everyday experience in the world, the society, within which we live. Some of these arenas of sexuality are a source of great pleasure for us, a source of great joy. Some of them, though, are a source of great pain and sadness and perplexity. And here today no doubt we have people for whom some is joyful, and for whom some is sad, with many others of us caught in the middle.

Some of what I emphasize today I emphasized last Sunday as well. Indeed, there’s one thing that I’m going to be emphasizing repeatedly and deliberately again today and that is this: that despite the chaos and the confusion and the permissiveness of our day and generation, despite the common consensus in society around us that “anything goes” as long as it’s within a caring relationship (and I want to uphold the importance of those caring

relationships – there are too many relationships these days which are not caring; I want to uphold that). But the message is that anything goes within those relationships, and despite the mixed messages that we often have that come from even the pages of scripture with great leaders in the Bible who are in the midst of relationships which involve, for example, polygamy and at times adultery – yet for all that, ***if you read the Bible from the beginning to the end there is a stream that flows through the Bible on this particular issue – a clear center begins to emerge.***

- It's there in the beginning in Genesis Chapter 2,
- it's there in Jesus' teaching in the gospels,
- and it's there in the early Christian church as well in the letters and even in the book of Revelation.

A center, a standard, and that is this: **the standard of intimate sexuality taking place in the relationship between one man and one woman covenanted together forever.** That's the center repeated in the pages of scripture. *One man, one woman, covenanted together forever,* and in that context, says Genesis and Jesus, "one flesh," intimate sexuality is appropriate. This is the standard and it's a standard that we in the Christian faith – indeed in the Judeo-Christian tradition – have been called to pursue.

1. This morning I want to explore in three different ways how we are to pursue this standard, and we're going to begin by saying exactly what I said last Sunday that if we hold this standard high, as God's "Plan A," God's "original intention" for the full expression of intimate sexuality – **if we hold this plan high we must always do so with humility.** We hold it high but we do so with humility and not with a hammer.

Last Sunday we looked at one of the great stories in all of the gospels the story that we find in John Chapter 8 of a woman caught in the act of adultery and some religious people bring this woman to Jesus. Some righteous, self-righteous, people bring this woman to Jesus and they want Jesus to condemn this woman and to take their side in this. But Jesus will not do it. He will not condemn her. He clearly does not condone her action (He says to her "go sin no more" – that is, he acknowledges that there is a standard; he knows the Commandment; he embraces the Commandment.) But he is not in the business of condemnation and says to her, "Is there no one left to condemn you? Neither do I condemn you!"

And some of us here today need to hear that loudly and clearly because we feel that sense of condemnation. But Jesus says "no I will not condemn you!" This is not why I came.

Some of us know John 3:16 very well: "*God so loved the world, gave his only son, whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.*"

But the question today is do you know John 3:17 as well? The next verse? "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through*

him might live.” This is his passion. Not to condemn us, nor to condone us, but that we might find life.

When we gather for worship here in our Presbyterian church and in other churches as well; when we gather for worship in our church you may or may not have noticed we have a pattern at the beginning of the service. We come both to adore God and to confess our sins and then to hear a word of God’s grace and mercy: To adore God because the God we worship, the God we adore welcomes all of us because all of us and this is really the statement we’re making at the beginning of every service when we confess our sins, **all of us are Plan B people**. Every single one of us. You may be on Plan B in this part of life; but I’m on Plan B on that part of life! But all of us are on Plan B somewhere! And yet we come before a Plan A God who holds up Plan A for us but who says to us I love you and I adore you, my Plan B people, and to you I sent my Son to live and die for you on the cross.

We come with humility under the cross and this is what binds us together. We are those who are (as Moses calls them) “hard of heart,” who’re weak and prone to sin – but we are also those who know our need of grace and mercy through Jesus Christ, and who believe that he has given his grace to us freely. So we hold the standards high that we have in scripture. But we don’t do it with a hammer. We do it in humility. All our ethical reflection is reflection which takes place under the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that’s the first thing we need to remember as we hold the standard high, as we hold Plan A high that we are all, every one of us Plan B people.

2. But not only that, we even hold the standard high **when there is nobody else holding the standard high with us!** And sometimes we may feel that that is exactly the case: that other people don’t care about the standard. They’ve abandoned the standard, that it’s passé, it’s old hat. And we are all alone. It’s common to feel this way these days.

So many people in our society believe that we are entering a period of history into which people have never walked before. It’s like Star Trek: “We’re going where nobody has been before!” Of course, to a certain extent this is true – at least in the realm of technology. Nobody has had the gadgets and gizmos we take for granted. But in the realm of sexual morality, nothing could be further from the truth. There is nothing new under the sun.

I well remember in my first couple of years studying for my PhD, about 30 years ago now, reading and reading and reading about the ancient world into which our Lord Jesus came – the background to the world and the environment within which his ministry took place, reading about the Greeks and Romans and in particular reading about the culture of that time which was called “Hellenism.” Hellenism was the name given to the culture stemming from the empire created by Alexander the Great some 350 years before Jesus, impacting the world for at least four centuries, up to and beyond the time of Jesus, and spreading as far east as India, as far south as Egypt, and west to Italy and perhaps beyond to Spain. This culture filled the known world. It was dominant and pervasive,

just as our Western culture is dominant and pervasive today. It filled the world and would have been conceived of as “modern.” As if any person with any sense would know that this was how things were and ought to be.

But it was into this world that the Hebrew ethic, the Ten Commandments, carried by Jews, and then carried by followers of our Lord Jesus, entered. It seems so unlikely that it would make any headway at all. They must have felt just as we feel at times, as if “the real world was out there” and “here we are, holding onto something which has had its day and would never last.” Well the truth is it has lasted. Cultures ebb and flow, and the power of that message, that gospel, that good news, that way of life that Jesus mentioned transformed Hellenism as it withered, and has affected and influenced our lives even to this very day.

There will always be times when the common culture seems more dominant than the gospel, but it’s into that kind of world that the gospel first came, and still does to our day – *and we have been called to proclaim it, not with a hammer but with humility and confidence, whether others are proclaiming it or not.* This is the center and we must hold on. Affirmed in Genesis, embraced by our Lord Jesus and by the early church: *God’s Plan A for Plan B people – one man, one woman, one flesh forever*, with humility if no one else is saying it.

3. And in the third place **we hold to the standard even if we don’t match up**, and even if we’re sure that we probably *never will* match up – and many of us may feel as if we are in that position – we say “I know that’s the standard but I’ve so messed up life it’ll never be. I can’t make it. I don’t have that power or that ability within me.”

Last Sunday I briefly mentioned the whole hot issue of our day the issue of homosexuality and the complexity of the issue but I added that the greatest issues we face in which people don’t meet the standard, the “In the beginning Plan A,” almost all relate not to homosexuals *but to heterosexuals!*

In this regard Jesus speaks quite clearly for example on the issue of lust. Now you’ve got to take my next words very carefully because what I want to say is this: “think of lust with me just for a moment.” . . . just for a moment . . . don’t quote me out of context here . . . but think of lust with me just for a moment.

It’s not just homosexual persons who wrestle with thoughts which may not fit Plan A. It’s all kinds of people who wrestle with thoughts that don’t meet Plan A. And Jesus points this out. Frederick Buechner puts it like this in his book *Godrick*:

Lust is the ape that gibbers in our loins. Tame him as we will by day he rages all the wilder in our dreams by night. Just when we think we’re safe from him he raises up his ugly head and smirks and there’s no river in the world flows cold and strong enough to strike him down. Almighty God, why dost thou deck us out with such a loathsome toy?

For many people, especially men – but increasingly the statistics are (and they’re rising rapidly increasingly) with women too – bringing this area of life under control is a lifelong

struggle. A lifelong struggle: a constant matter of sin and confession, and sin and confession, and sin and confession, and trying and failing, and sin and confession.

We live in a media-dominated world. We live in a visually explicit world. We live in a pornographically dominated world, and the struggle is hard. It's painful. It's difficult. We often fail. ***But that does not mean that we abandon Plan A.*** We hold it high, nevertheless, and I believe, for one, that this is Jesus' point when he speaks about divorce in what is probably one of the hardest passages in the scripture – certainly in the gospels. You may probably have never heard Matthew 19 read in church until this morning. It's one of those passages which sometimes we slip-slide around because it's hard. But Jesus speaks there quite explicitly not only about divorce but about the center of our understanding for intimacy in human relationships.

Let me read the passage again.

Some Pharisees came to Jesus and to test him they asked *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?”*

He answered, *“Have you not read that the one who made them, this is back to Genesis, at the beginning made them male and female? And for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh, one man one woman one flesh forever. They are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore says Jesus what God has joined together let no one separate.”*

The religious leaders said to him, *“Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?”*

He said *“It was because you are so hard hearted [I think in our context he could just have easily have said it's because you're all Plan B people. That's why. Sin affects our lives. We are Plan B people.] . . . that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives but [if you want to know what God's original intention is you need to go back to the beginning.] from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you that whoever divorces his wife [and here he really just screws it in] except for unchastity and marries another commits adultery.*

[Jesus' disciples are shocked by this. They say to him] *“If such is the case a man with his wife it is better not to marry!”*

But he said to them, *“Not everyone can accept this teaching but only those to whom it is given.”* Without God's help, no. We simply won't make it.

For many Jewish people in Jesus' day divorce was a relatively easy thing. There were two schools of thought amongst the rabbis. There was Rabbi Hillel who basically said that if your wife burns the dinner you can divorce her. Really! That easy, you don't have to do much. And then there was a rabbi called Shammai, who was much harder, holding to a tougher line. People might have expected Jesus to go with the Hillel line, gentle Jesus!. And that's what makes this passage so stunning (even to his disciples). The option was there to take the easy route, but Jesus did not choose it. He does not just say “It is no big deal.” He says it is a big deal. And his disciples hardly believe what they are hearing, as if to say,

“Good grief Jesus. Have you lost your mind? Have you lost your grace? Given what you’ve said then it’s better not to marry at all.” This is serious.

To which I think if we were to expand Jesus’ words he would have replied like this:

“Yes it is serious and that’s precisely my point. Indeed, it’s my only point!! – I am not out at the moment to legislate all the ‘ifs, ands and the buts,’ all of the exceptions that might arise and they might arise. I am out to bring you back to the center.”

That’s Jesus’ purpose. When we read, as we read earlier in the service, the words of the apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians, in 1st Corinthians 7, or if you go back to Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (the words that Jesus’ opponents refer to when they spoke to Jesus), the focus is clearly on all the ifs ands and buts’ that arise in life: life is like that. Jesus knows this. He’s not cruel. BUT, he also knows that and is saying that that “here is the center.” The scriptures as a whole tells us that we don’t live at the center. We all mess up, or get caught up in the messiness of life: whether we face rejection or crisis or grief or death or violence or alcohol or family history of adultery itself, things happen in life. We don’t all match up. That’s the bad news. But the good news is that God meets us at the heart of the mess, just as Jesus met the woman caught in adultery, and says,

I want the best for you! Plan A! I know we’re down here in Plan B – you’ve made bad choices along the way and probably have been caught up in the bad choices of others: I don’t condone you. BUT, hear me out, neither do I condemn you. I have no interest in the blame game. Or the guilt game. I have no pleasure in making things worse, only better. What I’m interested in is in moving on together: I challenge you to walk with me on a new path again. Don’t let the past get you down. Let us move on together. Don’t drop the standard. Keep the standard high. But walk with me hand in hand as we seek new life together.”

There’s a stream that goes through scripture. It winds around in all kinds of different areas. But the stream I believe is constant. God’s Plan A for Plan B people. Not that we drop our standards but we hold them high.

- We pursue those standards God gives to us not with pride, with hubris, not with a hammer, but with humility. But we pursue them nevertheless.
- We pursue them whether there are any other people who will go with us. We pursue them because Jesus forged the path for us.
- We pursue them even if it seems at times that we can never make it. And if we feel we can never make it in some part of our lives (and for every one of us there’s some part of our life where we say I can never make it), we pursue them nevertheless, under the cross, hand in hand with our Savior who calls us, always calls us, saying “Follow me!”

Let’s bow before God in prayer, let us pray. Holy God look down upon our lives with mercy and grace. Sometimes we follow you and we find it easy. Sometimes we seek to follow you and we find it hard. Sometimes we follow you and like the disciples we are

perplexed. Meet us where we are. Never leave us. Lead us to where you want us to be.
Amen.

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