

Midweek Lenten Worship
March 8, 2017
Exodus 20:1-21

Luther's Small Catechism: The Ten Commandments

Our midweek Lenten worship services will focus on Luther's *Small Catechism* – always a helpful tool for faith, but especially appropriate in this 500th Reformation Anniversary year. Week by week, we will look at the chief articles of faith, beginning with the Ten Commandments this evening. May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

For many, it's hard to separate the Ten Commandments from Charlton Heston in Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 movie by the same name. Did Moses really look like that? Hmm... What we do know is that the commandments were only given by God *after* He had delivered his chosen people from slavery in Egypt. Only after the Lord God had acted in behalf of his people did He then spell out how they were to live in relationship with him and with one another, and this is what has come down to us as the Ten Commandments, or the Law. Personally, I prefer the Hebrew term, *Torah*, which means "instruction." I find that more helpful than the term "law." But as good Lutherans, that is the often-heard term: God's Law. Whatever we call them, different believers number the commandments differently. Some, like Lutherans and Catholics, include verses 4-6 under the First Commandment (v. 3), while other denominations separate those out. Some divide verse 17 into the last two commandments, while others keep this as one. I think we have something to learn from our Jewish friends in numbering the commandments. For them, the First Commandment is verse 2: **"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."** I think there is wisdom here, because this sets the context for everything that follows. God graciously acted to save his people, delivering them from slavery in Egypt. From there, God calls his chosen people into this covenant relationship with him.

As Lutheran Christians, we do not number the commandments even-steven with five on one table and five on the other, the cover of last month's *Lutheran Witness* notwithstanding. There is something deeper and more profound at work here. Commandments 1-3 (verses 3-11) speak of our relationship with God; the vertical dimension of our faith. Commandments 4-10 (verses 12-17) speak of our relationship with our neighbor; the horizontal dimension of our faith. Love of God must express itself in love for our neighbor, as Jesus himself taught when asked by a Pharisee which commandment is the greatest: **"And Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets'"** (Matthew 22:37-40). As Luther makes known in his explanation to each commandment, living out the Ten Commandments is more than just an avoidance of evil; it is also an active doing of good. And when we measure ourselves against God's Ten Commandments in this light, we see how miserably we have failed to live as God would have us live. Sins of commission and sins of omission, the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do, accuse us to our face. Of that 3-fold purpose of God's Law of curb, mirror, and rule, it is God's Law as mirror that shows us what we truly look like. The Ten Commandments are an S.O.S. In harsh reality, they "Show Our Sin," and earn us God's wrath and punishment.

The Law prepares us for the Gospel – the good news that Jesus has fulfilled all the requirement of the Ten Commandments perfectly in our behalf. By his sinless life and his innocent suffering and death upon the cross, the debt of sin has been paid. Written in Jesus' own blood, our ledger now reads "Paid in Full." We have been set free – free not to serve our own selfish desires, but free to serve God by serving our neighbor. The motivation to do this is love as God in Christ has loved us (1 John 4:19), as Paul writes: **"Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law"** (Romans 13:8-10).

May God help us to live out this truth for Jesus' sake in this Lenten season and in every season of life. Amen.