

“Nourished for Holy Living”

Exodus 20:1-17, The Ten Commandments

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, based on World Communion Sunday material from UMC/GBOD¹

Here’s something you probably haven’t done since you were in school: It’s time for a pop-quiz! You don’t need pencil or paper, but I will test your memory. Back in 1975, a fast food chain unveiled its new sandwich with a song. Sing along with me if you know it:

“Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onion, on a sesame-seed bun.”

Well done! (That’s also how I like my burgers, by the way). Most of us remember that song.

Now, without looking at the scriptures, can we name the Ten Commandments? You can find them in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. This is a little harder, isn’t it? Well, here they are, in order:

- You shall have no other gods before me.
- You shall not make idols.
- You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
- Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
- Honor your father and your mother.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- You shall not covet.

How did you do? Did you get most of them? If you didn’t, know that you are in good company. According to a 2007 article in the *Christian Post*, most Americans know their burgers better than they know these commandments. In a survey, 80 percent knew the song about the all-beef patties, but only one person in 10 recognized “Do not kill” as one of the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments are one of the foundational documents of our faith. And we’ve got to admit, while the burgers are tasty, the Commandments are more satisfying, life-giving, and better for you than fast food. As we look at the commandments, we can see they are given to us in two groups:

- The first four are about how to be in relationship with God.
- The remaining six are about how to be in relationship with other people.

God offers these commandments as a gift. They were given to a people who wandered in the wilderness to provide a pattern, or structure, for communal life. They allowed them—and us—to have a common understanding of what it means to love, a covenant way of life in our relationships and everyday work.

- Each commandment is designed to shape our identity as God’s people.
- Each one is a reflection of God’s character.
- Each individual law reflects God’s desire for justice and forms a moral compass for our lives.

The Ten Commandments seem simple, just like the ingredients in a burger. But we know we can get more nourishing and wholesome values when we live in holy covenant with one another and with God.

Let’s recall that the Ten commandments are not a set of rules meant to place restrictions on God’s people. In Exodus 20:2 we read:

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

¹ “World Communion Sunday, Sermon Starter,” General Board of Discipleship, UMC, 2020.

Here we see that instead of restrictions, the Commandments provide us a way to live with the freedom found in loving God and loving our neighbor. We find liberation in God's directions about how to live wholehearted lives. And that's no easy task. It's not easy because our hearts are divided; we run after things that are not good for us; we enter into relationships that drag us down; our loyalties are often split between the holy ways of God and the enticing ways of the world. We need structure to have a wholehearted life, one that is devoted to God. We know we need this because we know our own hearts can go astray.

"Teach me your way, O Lord," wrote the psalmist, "that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name" (Psalm 86:11).

Here is good news: God gives us the structure, the pattern for holy living; we don't have to figure it out on our own.

The Ten Commandments are one of the primary sources for God's pattern for holy living. On World Communion Sunday, we recognize following the laws, the prophets, and Jesus bind Christian denominations together. When we come to the table of Holy Communion, hungry for justice and mercy, we are all equally valued by God who has liberated us.

When we present our special offering today, we recognize our hopes and dreams are interconnected with those of our sisters and brothers in faith. Through training opportunities and scholarships, we invest in the God-given strengths of United Methodist students around the world. The impact of this investment on their education is almost limitless. These students are learning to be leaders in many different fields: teaching, medicine, theology, human rights. Their understanding of holy living has already been guided by Jesus and the Ten Commandments. Some students will enter fields where there is no center of faith; yet they carry with them a spirit of discipleship that models holy living to others.

Jesus reminded the disciples:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart [there's the importance of a whole heart again], with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38).

When they are supported by the church, students put their trust in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

On World Communion Sunday, we live out our faith with life-affirming practices, recognizing the needs of our neighbors and investing in thriving, wholesome, healthy, and long lives. We go above and beyond the basic commandments and live into the spirit of them. We support measures that lead to peace, not just as an absence of conflict, but as contributors to abundant, remarkable life.

You and I, we grew up learning these laws, these Ten Commandments. Maybe our trouble is they are too familiar to us. Maybe we forget the full sense of their meaning and purpose. But studying these commandments is important, especially at time when moral authority seems lacking. That's because these Ten Commandments, this guide to holy living, was given out of love for us from the source of divine love and authority. They give us direction during chaos or crisis. They nourish us and nurture us, even in calamitous times, by reminding us of the God who is source of life and love.

When we try to be our best selves, using God's direction and the example of Jesus as our guide, we show up in the world in transformational ways. We touch others and are invited to enter into something that is more amazing than anything we imagine. When our starting and ending points are love, the rest falls into place.

I want to encourage you to take some time and study the Ten Commandments this week. Pray for the strength and guidance to engage them. Think about the nutritional value of these foundational laws for your life, and for our life together as God's people.

Amen.