

September 11

Building Community

Exodus 20:15-17

Today we look at the final three commandments. As we have stated several times, helping these former slaves to begin to see themselves as a community that supports one another, worships together, and honors each other's gifts were the basis behind all of these commandments. As they lived into them they became not a group of slaves but a nation and a faith community which has survived even to this day. These last three commands are about those actions that have a way of corrupting the lives of otherwise decent and responsible persons. In so doing they destroy community because when they happen people do not feel safe and respected and they doubt that the governmental structures are unbiased and something they can rely upon.

We see what happens when these break down. Theft and robbery are becoming routine in many urban areas. Packages cannot be left on doorsteps, cars are broken into routinely, and people are often robbed as they leave sporting events or restaurants. There is no community because of fear. Many minorities have fears that the police and the courts are prejudiced against them and feel threatened by law enforcement instead of feeling safe. We still struggle with the fears, the misplaced desires and doubts that were part of the Israelite community that made these commandments necessary. Their challenge to create a safer and fairer community is still with us. Today we will look at these three commands and, even more, see what God is still calling us to do today to make them a reality.

The command against stealing is broad and far reaching. It is more than God reminding us to not take someone else's stuff. These commands are always calling us to see a bigger picture in our thinking and our actions. To those early, recently enslaved individuals it needed to begin with the simple command of "don't take another's junk." As slaves they were often put in the place where they had to steal from their overlords just to stay alive. Seeing that what you have is special and all others should respect it is part of what it means to build community. Without it you have anarchy. But later the

concept of what it meant to steal from another expanded. Think about the story Jesus told concerning the rich man and Lazarus. He was criticized for not caring about Lazarus and helping him. You could almost say that he was stealing life from Lazarus by his uncaringness.

Think about what other possible forms of stealing we might be guilty of today. We, as a nation, are using more natural resources than we should. Are we stealing from the poor, from our children? When we buy goods produced in sweat shops because the prices are cheap are we stealing? When we demean the poor or mentally challenged is that stealing their honor? There is no easy answer to these questions. I raise them for us to see that part of the reason this commandment was given was to build community. When we take more for ourselves than we are willing to give others we are destroying that sense of community. This then challenges me to think about my actions, my purchases, and ask, "How am I doing?" If I see that some of what I am doing is stealing from others, even in subtle ways, then I need to change.

We have just been hearing about drug companies making obscene profits because they raised the prices of life-giving drugs over which they have a monopoly. Public outcry has reduced those costs somewhat but the people who get the big salaries because of these policies don't think of themselves as having stolen anything. It was just good business. Or, a little closer to home: Do you do most of your shopping at Costco or at Walmart. I know I am stepping on some toes but Costco provides a living wage with benefits for its employees. Walmart proclaims its low prices but often at the expense of those whom they employ. Now I shop at Walmart but I have to admit to feeling a little guilty when I do because of this commandment. I also try to support advocacy for their employees whenever I can.

You shall not bear false witness – is not about lying. It is about public testimony before the judge. This is partly why we still swear that what we are saying is the truth in court. Honesty in the courtroom is about creating a sense of trust and integrity throughout our society. It is more than in the courtroom. When politicians knowingly share falsehoods saying it is part of the game of politics, it cheapens the process.

Everyone now assumes that they should not believe what a politician says when they are running for election.

This command is saying that we need to live in such a way that one can count on the structures by which communities live together. This is why the issue of racial profiling is such a big deal. It is asking if the police act differently towards certain people because of racial prejudice. When bias is shown this has sown doubt as to their testimony in court. We continue to ask if the rules and tax laws are fairly applied or done in a way to support the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor. Warren Buffett has been championing this cause saying it is ridiculous that he should pay at a lower tax rate than his secretary. Yes, the total amount he pays is greater but, as a percentage of income, the law favor the rich. This command talks about integrity of our courts, our government and our institutions. We need to do all we can to support things when they are doing well, but also to not turn a blind eye to things when we see a lack of honesty and integrity.

Coveting is talking about a mindset that creates a deep envy or desire for the fortunes of others. It talks not about ordinary envy, like you are envious when a friend buys a new car, and instead about that deep desire to have their stuff no matter what the consequence. This desire often leads to stealing, to murder, to deceit. Those who covet are never content with what they have. They find it impossible to celebrate the good fortune of another. They see it as taking something from them. Part of the flip side of coveting is a deprecation of our worth and value. People envy what another has achieved and then think worse about themselves. I have seen friendships strained when one friend makes a new acquaintance that seems so much more accomplished. Their earlier friend now pulls back assuming their long-time friend doesn't want to hang around with them. The friend is not comparing, wanting to be friends with both. But because the coveting bug has bitten one of their friends it makes it almost impossible to keep that friendship alive.

This command challenges us to look at our actions and reactions to things around us. Are we able to look in the mirror and say, "It is well." Or do we think less about ourselves because our house is not as nice as, our wardrobe not quite what we

want it to be, our bank account smaller than it should be... All of this is that deep seated thing called coveting and we are reminded to let it go. We are to celebrate who we are and that is a beloved child of God.

So we end our journey through the Ten Commandments with these final three that challenge us to celebrate who we are and demand that all try to live with integrity. When we do this the temptation to steal will disappear because we are happy with what we have. We will live honestly and with integrity and demand no less from others and, in celebrating who we are, we will not get drawn into the envy and coveting trap, and our lives and all of our community is strengthened.

Stepping farther back we see how in all of them they were challenging us to live as a moral, faithful community. From putting God first, to celebrating rest, to respecting families, life, and property we gain a vision of what life should be. We can also see how far we are still from that vision today. This is why the Ten Commandments are still so important. They challenge our way of life and ask us to seek the best of life.

Since today is the anniversary of 9/11 let me share a story that sums up what happens when people live out these truths in practice. John Abruzzo, a staff accountant for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, was working at his computer on the 69th floor of One World Trade Center when the first hijacked jet sliced into the tower. "It felt like the building was punched," he says. "My desk faces north ... the side the airplane hit. By the time Abruzzo, a quadriplegic, had maneuvered his power chair into the hallway, he saw only 10 of his coworkers -- everyone else had already evacuated. Someone found the office EVAC+CHAIR and transferred Abruzzo into the rescue device, which resembles a large, folding baby stroller with rear wheels that pop up and a sled like component that takes their place when going down stairs. Nine of his 10 coworkers worked in shifts of three to four, carefully lowering Abruzzo down each flight of stairs. One of them couldn't help physically, so he scouted ahead. When he returned, he warned of heavy smoke around the 40th floor, so the group, with Abruzzo in tow, cut across to a stairwell on the other side of the building. Somewhere near the 30th floor, the crew of coworkers carrying Abruzzo had to move aside as firefighters rushed up the stairwell. At the 20th floor they heard a rumble that seemed to come from the other

tower: steel and concrete collapsing. At the 10th floor they heard another rumble but kept going. "Nothing was going to stop us." Finally they made it to the lobby, where Abruzzo had to be carried over chunks of fallen concrete. Damage and debris had made the exit impassable. Firefighters directed Abruzzo's helpers to lift him still in the EVAC+CHAIR through a knocked out window and out onto the sidewalk.

They looked up and saw fire engulfing the top of the tower. "We thought we were fine now, we were out, but a fireman said, 'Get out, GET OUT!'" They squeezed into the mob streaming up the streets away from Lower Manhattan, taking turns pushing Abruzzo, still in the rescue device. "We couldn't see the tower when it came down. There was a cloud of debris chasing the firemen and policemen. One of the firemen grabbed my chair, carried me into Stuyvesant High School, and then everything just went black." Once the blackness lifted, an ambulance took Abruzzo to a hospital for smoke inhalation.

Because they valued life, valued community, valued integrity, all basic to the Ten Commandments, Abruzzo lived. This is why these words matter. Help us to live out their full implications in our lives this day.