



## Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
The Third Sunday in Lent ~ March 15, 2009*

Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

“The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” Wisdom from Steven Covey. It's not always an easy thing to do, perhaps not ever an easy thing to do. Because there's so much to do. For most of us there are too many things we can not not do.

Hopefully, there is much among our myriad activities that we enjoy. Hopefully, among our myriad activities, there are conversations with those whom we love, those whom we care about; time spent appreciating one another's company. Hopefully, from time to time, our senses are blessed with gifts of beauty – music, art, something delicious, the sunlight in the trees; our minds awakened with wisdom or insight from a good book, our hearts stirred by the affection of a dog, or the tale of a generous deed done by a stranger, a good joke that frees us to laugh with abandon. Hopefully, among our myriad activities, there are accomplishments achieved and rewards bestowed – by others or our own inner judges, an occasion to look back upon the way we have trod and say “well done!” or at least, “not bad, under the circumstances.”

Often, however, among the too many things we can not not do, there are those things from which we derive little pleasure or grace – just the insistent requirements of the busy lives we have set in motion for ourselves – fixing the closet door that sticks, putting air in the tires, another load of laundry, answering the emails that we didn't get to last week, and of course, paying the bills, always the bills. And the lists in our head grow and grow, and get heavier by the hour. Prompted by our ever-insatiable appetites and our quest for more – more stuff, more experiences, juggling more activities simultaneously – the busy-ness turns to anxiety, and the anxiety to chronic stress. Until, exhausted, we concede that we are no longer in charge of the life we have created.

Obviously, we need to re-set our priorities and follow them.

A classic story about a business management consultant is instructive (as told by Ken Kesselus). “The CEO of a large company stared failure in the face as he floundered, trying to pull his workforce out of a production tailspin. Swallowing his pride, he called in a consultant and said he would take any and all advice. The consultant asked the CEO to list what he did in the course of a normal week. Once this was done, she told the CEO to rank the list in priority. This took a while, but when it was finished, she told the CEO what he needed to do. “When you come to work, complete item number one before attending to item number two, and complete number two before going to number three. The next day, take out the list and start with number one again and repeat the process. Do the same each and every day. Don't worry if you fail to reach lower items on your priority list. That's it.”

The CEO tried it and turned the company around. He lived into his own priorities and his workforce followed.”

You probably know that story, or at least you know the truth contained in that story. This Sunday in the middle of Lent seems a good time to remember, and put it to use; a good time to re-visit our priorities, our Lenten discipline: How's that going for you? Are you sticking with it, finding the rhythm? Or is it more like, “Lenten discipline? Oh yeah, I meant to do that, but then I got busy and, well....”

Let's keep this straightforward. We don't have to re-invent the wheel, or the tablets, to keep the main thing the main thing. For the main thing has been spelled out for us: “Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” This is the main thing; number one on the list, today, tomorrow, the next day and every day after it.

The first commandment and the nine that follow really define just two things: our relationship with God and our relationship with our neighbors. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength; and the second is like unto it: love your neighbor as yourself.

The main thing is to begin each day at the top of the list, to return, remember, reaffirm and renew for yourself, the centrality of the first commandment: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you thus far on the way. I led your ancestors before you, am leading you now, and shall be with you always, even to the end of the age.”

We may imagine the ten commandments to be a given. They've been around – well, since Moses. Of course, that doesn't mean we've been paying attention. No doubt there was a beautiful sunrise this morning, and yesterday too, but I missed it. If asked, we might say, of course, God is central to, for, in our existence. Yet the important thing is to orient our lives toward that truth.

The first three commandments speak of our relationship with God, our love for God; the last six speak of our relationship with one another, our love for one another. The fourth commandment is the lynch pin, that helps make fulfillment of the other nine possible. “Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien residents in your town (i.e., not even the cheap labor; the hired help).

In its original context, this commandment actually has less to do with the temple and prayer, and everything to do with the economy. It's a command to cease from working, to put a halt to production. The original context was Pharaoh's Egypt in which the Hebrew people were enslaved and forced to produce an ever-increasing quota of bricks. Paraphrasing Walter Brueggemann: To observe the Sabbath is a politically subversive act; a regular, disciplined, highly visible reversal that threatens the acquisitive, imperial economy; a bodily statement that my life does not consist in production and consumption. Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. I am the Lord your God, who brought you thus far on the way.

There is a rhythm built into us, a yearning to rest and enjoy what we have done; to stop working and breathe deeply. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “On the Sabbath we specifically care for the need of eternity planted in our own soul.” Similarly John Calvin, the founder of what we know as the Protestant work Ethic wrote: “On the Sabbath we cease our work so God can do God's work in us.” I close with a gift, a poem by R.S. Thomas, an Anglican priest who lived in the remote countryside of Wales.

The poem is called "The Moor":

It was like church to me.  
I entered it on soft foot,  
breath held like a cap in the hand.  
It was quiet.  
What God was there made himself felt,  
not listened to, in clean colours  
that brought a moistening of the eye,  
in movement of the wind over grass.  
There were no prayers said. But stillness  
of the heart's passions – that was praise  
enough; and the mind's cession  
of its kingdom. I walked on,  
simple and poor, while the air crumbled  
and broke on me generously as bread.

Go forth now, into the busy-ness of your life, keeping the main thing the main thing.