"Where Do These Words Belong?" October 12, 2025
Exodus 20:1-17 Westminster, Greenville
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time Ben Dorr
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The book that I'm holding right now is called The Book of Common Worship. Some of you may know what this is, but if you don't, no worries. It's the book that most Presbyterian pastors use to help structure a worship service.

It lays out a Presbyterian order of worship.
It's built on our history and our heritage.
What you see in your bulletin this morning follows the order of worship that's found in this book.

However, there are variations.
Things you don't have to have, but you can have if you want.

Did you know that one of the practices that used to be in our Presbyterian heritage and tradition—and it's still in this book—is a reading of the 10 Commandments every Sunday during worship?

The suggested place is right after the prayer of confession and assurance of pardon. Now that we are a forgiven people, this is how we live...

In other words, in a former day, everyone knew the Ten Commandments, and recited them, most likely from memory, every week. Now I'm not suggesting we add that to worship every Sunday, but I do wonder...do we still know the Ten Commandments?

In order to find out, I've got three things to give you this morning...

A game to play.
A test to take.
And an experiment to try.

The game is called “You Be the Judge.”

What you’re judging is whether the examples I’m about to share are a violation of the 10 Commandments. Easy enough?

Example #1:

As I’ve told some of you before, when I was in seminary, I thought to myself, you know, I’m about to spend my entire career working in a church on Sunday mornings. And I’m spending 7 days a week in seminary studying the Bible and theology and church...so I’m going to exercise my rebellious streak.

And I decided to take a break from church on Sundays. For three straight years, I didn’t go to church. I went for a run, or I did homework, or I slept in and read the newspaper. Only on the rare occasion did I make it to worship on a Sunday morning.

Was I breaking the sabbath, commandment #4?
You be the judge.

Example #2:

In every church I’ve served, I have had a proclivity for noticing, when I go to visit a church member in their home, whenever the house happens to have a really nice, screened in back porch. You see, I’ve always wanted a house with a screened in back porch, but it’s never been top priority in the houses we chose to buy.

So, I've made mental notes along the way, and maybe one day, years from now, after our sons are through with college, we'll save a little money and add a screened in patio to the back of our house.

If I do that, will I be breaking commandment #10?

You shall not covet...anything that belongs to your neighbor.
You be the judge.

Or just take what happened this past week.

This is purely hypothetical, mind you, but let's just say that your pastor's favorite baseball team flies out in the bottom of the 8th inning with the bases loaded in game four of the division series and fails to make it to the next round of the playoffs, and in an impassioned moment, your pastor curses that same team...using the name of God.

In that purely hypothetical scenario, did I break commandment #3?

Now...silly game, I know.
Why did I want you to play that game?
Because behind the game lies a question:
Where do these words belong?

They belong in Sunday liturgy, but are no longer a part of our Sunday liturgy. Where to they belong?

Should they be a guide or a rule in how we schedule our Sundays?
Should they help determine the kind of house we own?
Do they carry any weight when I'm cheering on my favorite team?

Where do these words belong?

Here at Westminster, some of you encountered these words even before you received your bulletin this morning. How many of you entered the building through those doors right outside the Narthex?

You know what those doors are called, right?
They are the Ten Commandment doors.

The Commandments are not written out.
Just numbers on the handles of those doors.
But those doors are a stroke of brilliance.

Because the first place these words belong is in a house of worship. Whether in synagogue or church, the Ten Commandments are not just broad "guidelines for humanity in general."

They are, as Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon put it, "a counter-cultural way of life for those who know who...and whose they are."[1]

Which brings me to the test.
What's the First Commandment?

"You shall have no other gods before me."

Now that's correct in our Presbyterian tradition.
But did you know that's not correct in EVERY religious tradition?

The original Hebrew does not call these the Ten Commandments. They're called the Ten Words. And there's no number before each **thou shalt not...**which leaves it open to interpretation how to number the words that God speaks.

So take another look at your insert with the passage from Exodus.

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[1] Stanley M. Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life,* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999.

What's the first word God spoke?

Verse 2:
"I am the Lord your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery..."

That portion right there is known as the Prologue in our Reformed tradition. But that's not how it's read in the Orthodox Jewish tradition.

What we call "Prologue"—Orthodox Jews consider to be the "First Word." And then, verse 3 ("no other gods") is combined with verses 4-6 (about "no idols") to form the "Second Word."[2]

Why is this important?

Because I don't want you to overlook verse 2:
"I am the Lord your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery..."

It's a verse that's crucial to understanding the entirety of the Ten Commandments.

Consider the context:
The Israelites have just escaped from Pharaoh.
They have been saved by God, set free by God.

It's freedom FROM...

Freedom from the cruelty that crushed them.
Freedom from an empire that oppressed them.

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[2] Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, in the *Interpretation* series, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

But freedom from...is not enough.
The Israelites are also set free...for a purpose.
Do you remember what that purpose is?

According to Exodus 8.1:
"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: Let my people go, so that they may worship me.'"

It's freedom FOR...

In other words, the Israelites have been set free for the purpose of worshiping God, and the way that they will do that...begins with the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments teach us what freedom really means.
Freedom isn't just doing what we want, whenever we want.
Freedom is about being the people whom God created us to be.
Freedom is about GETTING WHAT WE LOVE...in the right order.

As Hauerwas and Willimon put it:

"Part of the problem is our current presumption that freedom is *choice* rather than *desire*. God created us as passionate beings. We rightly desire. The problem is when our desire becomes disordered..."[3]

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Let me get at it like this.

A colleague once told about a play that he helped out with back in high school. TWO THINGS stand out about the play in his memory.

[3] Hauerwas and Willimon, *The Truth About God*.

One was the director.

She was new to the school, and she wanted to do a good job. But more than that, she wanted the students to really remember this experience.

So she gave generously of herself to get things right:

She carefully coached the students,
living on fast food so she could work afternoons and nights,
staying late to help pitch in with the people designing the props…

She poured her heart and soul into making this a memorable moment in the students' lives.

The second thing he remembers is the opening night.

By opening night, the play was PERFECT. The curtains opened, electricity was in the air, and the first act went like a dream.

The play was a comedy, and the audience was laughing at all the right parts, the timing of the actors was down pat.

In the second act, however, one of the students forgot a line.
You could see it on his face.
He knew it was his turn, but he'd forgotten the words.

The rest of the cast knew it, and the director knew it, but there was this pregnant moment where the audience did NOT YET realize what was happening.

The director tried to mouth the line to her student, but suddenly—the kid spoke.

What he said WAS NOT a line in the play…but it WAS incredibly funny! And the audience roared with laughter, and everyone backstage sighed with relief.

Now they could get on with the play.

The problem was, the actor who made up the line heard the laughter of the audience…and he LIKED it.

He liked it A LOT.

So he made up another line.
This too was funny—not as funny as the first line, but the audience chuckled.

So he made up another line, then another, then another—and before anyone knew what had happened, the play had spun out of control.

There was no retrieving it. The play was lost.[4]

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Why was the play lost?
Not because a teenager forgot one of his lines.
It was lost...because he forgot who he was supposed to be.

Did you know that an early Christian definition of being lost...was to have amnesia?

To forget who it is that God created us to be?
Maybe that's why these words used to be read in worship every Sunday.

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[4] Thomas G. Long, "Facing Up To Temptation," in *Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter*, Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 1995.

No other gods.
No idols.
No wrongful use of the name of the Lord our God.
Observe the sabbath, keep it holy.
Honor your father and mother.

No murder.
No adultery.
No stealing.
No lying.
No envying what your neighbor has.

I'm thinking now of an experiment.
Not the one I want you to try.
But an interesting one, nonetheless.

In the 1930s, the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer served as the head of a small seminary in what was, at that time, Finkenwalde, Germany.

The seminary was part of the Confessing Church.

Which meant that it was training pastors in defiance of the Nazi regime. It was under surveillance by the Gestapo, which meant that some in the seminary were arrested...and after two years, the seminary was finally shut down.

But standing against the Nazis was not the only thing for which this seminary was known. During its existence, Bonhoeffer tried a little experiment. He instituted a rule for how all those who were a part of that seminary community—

students and faculty alike—

ought to speak.

As an expression of the gospel, no person in the community was allowed to talk about another person without that person present! Even if the intent behind a secret conversation was to help that person or do something good for that person, talking about that person without that person being present was not allowed.

Think about that.
What would it mean if churches tried to institute that rule today?

There would be no gossip.
No after the meeting church meetings in the parking lot.

If I proposed that rule for Westminster, how long do you think it would last?

Right.
I guarantee that there would a group in our parking lot talking about Ben's misguided rule after worship today!

It also proved impossible for Bonhoeffer's seminary.

The students and faculty—
they tried and they failed,
they tried and they failed....

And yet, by attempting to live according to this rule, the students and faculty learned as much...as they did from any sermon or Bible study.[5]

If I can put it like this,
by limiting their freedom,
they learned something about love,

[5] Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2004. The story originally appears in Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000.

they learned something about who God created to them to be.

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I asked at the beginning of this sermon where these words, the Ten Commandments, belong.

Here's the experiment I'd like you to try.

Recycle your bulletin for today.
But keep the insert.
Put the Ten Commandments in your pocket or purse.
Take them home.

And every Monday morning, from now until Christmas, as you drink your coffee, before work begins, before the busyness of the week begins, read these words.

Consider the Pharaohs in your life.

Whatever it is that controls you right now, whatever it is that keeps trying to DEFINE you right now....your work...your perfectionism...your fear...your debt...your shame over mistakes made long ago.

I don't know.
I do know this.
Pharaoh doesn't get to tell you who you are.

The gift of love that these words represent...that's who you are.

What would happen if you read these words every week, and reminded yourself that this...this is who God created you to be?

Amen.