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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/16/2011, Midweek Lent 1: The Ten Commandments  
Exodus 20:1-17. Also Deuteronomy 5:6-21

PRAYER OF THE DAY for the First Week of Lent

P Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS ..... Exodus 20:1-17, RSV  
*[Note from Pastor Fryer: I have laid out the Ten Commandments as Luther numbered them. Lutherans and Catholics agree on this numbering, but others do not. John Calvin, for example, considered the commandment about graven images to be the Second Commandment and therefore combined the coveting commandments at the end into one commandments, the Tenth Commandment.]*

<sup>1</sup>And God spoke all these words, saying,

(Introduction, identifying which God it is who gives these Commandments) <sup>2</sup>“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

(First Commandment) <sup>3</sup>You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; <sup>5</sup>you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

(Second Commandment) <sup>7</sup>You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

(Third Commandment) <sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; <sup>10</sup>but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; <sup>11</sup>for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

(Fourth Commandment) <sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you.

(Fifth Commandment) <sup>13</sup>You shall not kill.

(Sixth Commandment) <sup>14</sup>You shall not commit adultery.

(Seventh Commandment) <sup>15</sup>You shall not steal.

(Eighth Commandment) <sup>16</sup>You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

(Ninth and Ten Commandments. Luther applies the Ninth Commandment to your neighbor's "house" and other physical possessions, and he applies the Tenth Commandment to your neighbor's "spouse" and other living relationships.) <sup>17</sup>You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's."

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Martin Luther loved the Ten Commandments. He believed them, taught them, commended them to others, and rejoiced in them. You would think that Lutherans would follow him in this. And certainly many Lutherans do. Nonetheless, there are certain dynamics that lead some Lutherans, above other Christians, to shy away from the Ten Commandments. I do not think that the Missouri Synod is tempted in this manner, but other kinds of Lutherans might be tempted to deemphasize our Lord's Commandments.

I hesitate some to go into these things with you, not wanting to discourage you or make you weary. Plus, maybe I will not express these dynamics and distinctions right. So, let me tell you my theme right off the bat: Luther loved the Ten Commandments, and we should too. If your eyes glaze over at the end of a weary day as I try to discuss strengths and temptations of Lutheranism, well, that's okay. Just remember my theme: let us be people of the Commandments!

Let me broaden the perspective some to try to explain this particular Lutheran temptation.

I once had a brief conversation with the great Lutheran ecumenical theologian Harding Meyer. That conversation took place right here at Immanuel, back in the days when Professor Meyer was a visiting professor at Union Seminary, where Pastor Lotz taught. Dr. Meyer gave me a wonderful image for why ecumenical theology is so important. Ecumenical theology is the labor of the various parts of Christ's divided church on earth to put the church back together again, to restore Christian unity.

One part of ecumenical theology is simply that Christians should value and show respect for other parts of the church. So here is the image Harding Meyer

gave me about that: He said that the faith of the Church is not a plastic image hanging on a wall, like a painting. The thing about a painting is that you can take it in from one perspective. It might take a long time, but you can sit there on a bench at our nearby Metropolitan Museum of Art and see all that is to be seen in a work of art there on the wall. But the faith of the Church, Meyer, said is not like that. It is “more like Mt. Kilimanjaro rising up from the African plain.” It literally *cannot* be taken in from one perspective. The various parts of the ecumenical church, then, from Harding Meyer’s point of view, each have some true, albeit partial, view of the truth of the faith. That is why ecumenical theology is crucial. We have true need to learn from other churches and other denominations so that we can come closer to the fullness of the Church’s faith.

Well, what is our Lutheran specialty? What are we Lutherans especially good at seeing? What portion of the catholic faith are we expert in? I think many of us would answer that our specialty is the doctrine of justification by faith. We are the ones who by long experience and by the original drama of our founding are especially good at detecting works righteousness in the church.

But, alas, there is a temptation that comes with this, our particular specialty. Consider the magnificent Epistle Lesson we read every Reformation Sunday. It is from Romans Chapter Three and it ends thus:

<sup>27</sup>Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. <sup>28</sup>For we hold that a person is justified by faith *apart from works* prescribed by the law. (Romans 3:27-28, NRSV, from the Epistle Lesson for Reformation Sunday)

Notice that phrase “apart from works.” There is no logical necessity to conclude from these words “apart from works,” that works prescribed by the law are unimportant. Indeed, the Lutheran Reformers were careful and passionate about affirming the old teaching of the Bible that good works necessarily follow from faith. Still, a tendency to shy away from good works, for fear that those works dishonor our free salvation won for us by Jesus Christ, has haunted Lutheranism from the beginning.

Imagine the situation of the original Lutherans: they placed their careers, their families, and in Luther’s case even his life on the line standing against works righteousness. And their word of caution against good works was needful in an age when Christians were misled into thinking that they could earn their eternal salvation by way of good works, but which always left the most spiritual of them anxious and perhaps even despairing as to whether they could ever do enough good works to be worthy of heaven. Luther and the other Reformers did important work consoling the troubled conscience by pointing people away from their good works toward Christ and his righteousness.

Still, the de-emphasis on good works has the potential to lead to indifference or even opposition to good works. And so it is that I have heard a living, functioning Lutheran pastor, for example, say that “the true glory of the Gospel is freedom

from God's law." When I asked him whether this included freedom from the Ten Commandments, he answered Yes. And most of the other clergy in the group agreed with him.

But I am persuaded that Martin Luther would not have agreed with him. That is why I want to lift up some passages in Luther's *Large Catechism* in which he teaches us to treasure and obey the Ten Commandments.

Let's begin with a general description of the commandments. Luther believed that the commandments have something to do with a life pleasing to our Maker. Here is a kind of summary statement about that from Luther near the end of his discussion of the Ten Commandments:

Here, then, we have the Ten Commandments, a summary of divine teaching on what we are to do to make our whole life pleasing to God. They are the true fountain from which all good works must spring, the true channel through which all good works must flow. Apart from these Ten Commandments no deed, no conduct can be good or pleasing to God, no matter how great or precious it may be in the eyes of the world.

Now, it could be argued that the fact that the Ten Commandments describe a life pleasing to God does not mean that Christians should take the plain, old-fashioned stance of trying to obey them. It could be argued that there is spiritual danger in trying to obey them, so that we fall back into works righteousness. Besides, it could be argued that it is hopeless that we could obey the Ten Commandments, that we could never do so perfectly, and that *that is the point* of the Ten Commandments: to reveal our inability to obey the law of God *so that* we turn to Christ and cling to him for our salvation.

Luther would agree with much of this. Nonetheless, he still believed that we should try to obey the Commandments. He still believed that Christians ought to try to walk in the paths pleasing to our Maker.

Indeed, Luther delighted in the Ten Commandments. He thought it was so very refreshing to be able to be able to labor for that which lasts, for that which you have good reason for believing that God approves of. He would not trade all the tea in China for one of the Commandments, because tea is an uncertain thing, incapable of promising much about God, but the Commandments are solid. Luther much preferred the Ten Commandments to any work we could make up -- what Luther called "self-appointed works." So, here is one of Luther's passages along those lines:

O how great a price all the Carthusian<sup>1</sup> monks and nuns would pay if in the exercise of their religion they could bring before God a single work done in accordance with his commandment and could say with a joyful heart in his presence, "Now I know that this work is well pleasing to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carthusian>

Thee!” What will become of these poor wretched people when, standing before God and the whole world, they shall blush with shame before a little child that has lived according to this commandment and confess that with the merits of their whole lives they are not worthy to offer him a cup of water? It serves them right for their devilish perversity in trampling God’s commandment under foot that they must torture themselves in vain with their self-devised works and meanwhile have only scorn and trouble for their reward.

The advantage the little child has is that she is trying to obey the Fourth Commandment, “You shall honor your father and mother.” Her deeds might be humble and ordinary -- the simple things of trying to be a loving child -- yet they shine with holiness because they accord with the Commandments. Luther thought that was great!

Luther taught that it just makes sense that we should exercise ourselves in the Commandments. He said that we live in a dangerous world, in which the Devil would love to destroy us, and Luther felt that the Commandments were part of the armor by which we could stay out of the Devil’s pasture:

Oh, what mad, senseless fools we are! We must ever live and dwell in the midst of such mighty enemies like the devils, and yet we would despise our weapons and armor, too lazy to examine them or give them a thought!

So, give the Commandments some thought. That is the simple theme of this evening sermon. Let us give the Commandments some thought. Christ died that we might have life. Walking in the Commandments is part of that life. Walking in the Commandments is one way of trying to walk alongside Jesus, who walked in those paths all his days and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

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Hymn following the sermon, LBW 230, *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word.*