

Written in Stone

Exodus 20, Matthew 21:33-46

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at the Union Church of Bay Ridge © 2008 Rev. Mary B. Speers, Pastor

Do you know what this is?

Most of you do. It's a thumb drive, and it looks kind of like a worry stone, it feels like one, too, it feels good in your hand. It's literally an aide-mémoire, an aid to memory—this sermon is on it, as a matter of fact. It holds one gigabyte, whatever that is, and I can carry it around in my pocket. It's kind of the latest version of a floppy disk, or if you put music on it, a cassette tape, and some of them can carry everything in your whole computer, so you don't have to lug your computer around, just this little thing. Plug it into any computer anywhere, and it'll print your sermon, or play your music, or whatever you need it to do.

What were Moses's stone tablets like? There they are, sort of, on your bulletin cover, and you think of Charlton Heston of course—did you realize that movie was made as recently as 1956? I always think of Cecil B. DeMille as the 1930s; I'd have thought *The Ten Commandments* was made in the 30s, in the Depression, but no, it was made in the optimistic, economically booming, but height-of-the-Cold-War second half of the 1950s.

Anyway, we think of the stone tablets as those great big tombstone-like things Charlton Heston receives from heaven in the movie. Now have any of you ever lifted, say, a flagstone in your yard, or even a brick? I don't care how much Charlton Heston worked out, those tablets in the movie were not real stone. Papier mâché, probably, from the Props Department. They looked good on screen, they looked weighty and important, and of course the movie wasn't even the first time the tablets looked like that, in art or in our collective imagination. Why? Well, think of all the smoke and thunder here in the story. It is an awesome thing to receive from God these Ten Words (that's what the Hebrew says), this Outline for All of Life. A weighty matter, to be sure: "Written," we say, "in Stone."

So what were they, really? Have you ever been to the Metropolitan Museum, the Assyrian section, this time? In Egypt, where Moses and all the people of God were from, at least in their own memories—in Egypt, of course, people wrote most things on papyrus, which was a kind of fibrous paper made from the papyrus reed, which still grows on the banks of the Nile, and it's a popular houseplant, very delicate and graceful, you probably even know what it looks like.

And in Egypt they would also carve words on really big stones, which nobody had a prayer of catching, if they were to fall from heaven, but in Assyria, the other end of the Fertile Crescent, they wrote on tablets of clay with a little thing called a stylus, which made kind of triangular tracks, and a few of the tablets have survived, they're about the size and shape of a paperback book, a little bigger than a Bronze Age BlackBerry, let's

say more like this little tape recorder, portable, you can hold one in your hand while you're recording your sermon, or writing your "aleph-beth" on it. And being made of clay, they were recyclable, kind of like a cassette tape, you just smoothed over the surface and wrote on them again, unless you wanted to keep the information, in which case you could take them down and fire them along with the next load of pottery in the village kiln, and they would last pretty much forever, or at least long enough for an archaeologist to dig them up and put them in a museum.

So I propose, I don't know this for sure of course, but I propose—let's just imagine—that the original tablets were more like these much smaller, much more portable, much more hand-friendly, familiar, writing tablets, at the time in use in ancient Assyria, and also, by the way, in the Land of Canaan, where the People of God were headed. Let's just imagine that, and where does it take us?

So now, if they're made of stone, they're more permanent than clay, even fired clay (but did you catch that a silicon chip is just fired clay, a form of human-made stone?)—more permanent, but still a size that can be carried around in the desert for forty years, along with all the gold and jewelry they are still carrying around until Exodus chapter 32, but that's for next week. So that makes them MORE PERMANENT AND MORE PORTABLE, kind of like my little worry stone here. You can carry them around, because as we're about to see, you're going to need them.

Now of course there is a kind of debate over the Ten Commandments in public places, at least in some parts of our country. Did you hear what I heard, or rather, read, in Frank Rich's column, and, liberal though he may be, in this instance he should know because he used to be a film writer, that a lot of those Ten Commandments tablets were actually promotional, MGM placed them all over the country to promote, guess what, *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston.

And I heard, although I couldn't find the source, that someone took a poll of the people who want to keep the Ten Commandments in public places, and do you know, they couldn't list them all? But in looking for that source, I did find that in Canada—that's safely far away, you see—someone asked 200 Anglican clergy, and only 68 out of 200 could name all ten commandments, but—this is really embarrassing—half of them, that's 100 out of 200—said they believed in space aliens.

So—setting aside the ridiculous notion that the tablets came from space aliens, we are faced with the reality that humans—that's all of us—seem to need an aid to memory, because, how does the saying go, whichever one you can't remember is the one you're compromising the most on at the moment?

Now I'm not sure a list of the ten commandments is going to stop crime, or sin, or human misery, but if we could only carry them around with us, as the Scripture says, written on our hearts, if only—well, we might not be in several of the messes we're in at the moment.

Again, kind of like my worry stone, being more permanent and more portable, they too are an aide-mémoire, an AID TO MEMORY, a kind of outline of how to live life as Images of God here on this planet. And as we proceed through Matthew's Gospel, we'll come in just a few more weeks to the even more succinct outline of Jesus, Love God (the first four Commandments or Words) and Love Neighbor (the following six).

But right here, Jesus quotes the Hebrew Scriptures after a particularly conscience-striking parable aimed at People of God who had some influence in the world, some privilege, and a sense of responsibility to the rest of the world as People of Faith, People of the Book, People (dare I say) of the Covenant—anyway, he quotes “the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and that too is a kind of encapsulation—quite literally, when you think about it. What do you put in a cornerstone?

The Wednesday Bible Study people helped me out here. You put a time capsule, don't you, of everything that was most important at the date of the cornerstone. You want to send a message, don't you; and it's very instructional, isn't it, if somebody else opens it, some time later, and it is like a message from the past, (or, ssssh, space aliens!—but time travel, anyway) and it's amazing when you look back how much has changed, but how much human nature has remained the same.

So let's look at our little aid-to-memory. You have it right here in front of you, on ephemeral paper rather than ephemeral papyrus. You can carry it with you, get another copy if you want to: there's a link on our website. You can now, thanks to the Internet, download the whole Bible straight down from heaven, just like Moses, if you want to—have a Charlton Heston moment in whatever version you like—but here they are, the Ten Commandments, or as Jesus summarizes them, “Love God, Love Neighbor”:

¹Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You 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.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

Those are the first four: LOVE GOD. Here are the ensuing six: LOVE NEIGHBOR:

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³You shall not murder.

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. [NRSV]

Now, these are principles, really, more like the Articles of our Constitution than like the volumes of interpretation that have aggregated to both. Someone asked Rabbi Hillel, who lived a generation before Jesus, to summarize the Law, and what was his reply? "Love God, love neighbor; the rest is commentary."

In Reformed churches, these ten commandments, or Jesus' summary of them (or Rabbi Hillel's) used to be read every Sunday before the Prayer of Confession, not to guilt people, but to help them remember, so that they could feel sure that they had really made a full confession. It actually helped them to clear the slate, completely unburden themselves, and thereby really have that sense of release and freedom they sought as they approached the Throne of Grace: the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me," indeed! And if you're like me, if in our modern day you have to think a bit before you can name them all, why not carry them on a little chip of silica, a little chip of stone, or a little piece of papyrus?

The trick, though, is to "re-member" them, to put their principles to practice in our lives, and in the corporate life of our church, our city, our beleaguered country. And the best way to do that, and *that* hasn't changed in three thousand years, is to write them not on a microchip, or on the wall of a public building, but, as the Hebrew Prophets say, to inscribe them on our hearts.

We have separation of church and state to protect us, to give us boundaries, to keep us in line with these principles. Religion and politics are human realities. As the Ten Commandments recognize, we all make a religion out of something, even those who think religion is silly, we all worship something, we all chase after something, if you think about it. We are all involved in politics because we are human beings, all part of the *polis*, of the Body Politic: we are all in some form of community, members of some family, somewhere. As John Donne wrote nearly four hundred years ago: "No one is an island, entire of itself: everyone is a piece of the continent, a part of the main..."

Religion and politics are human realities; church and state are human institutions. We *must* separate church and state, because we *can't* separate our religion from our politics, *nor should we, if we are people of faith*. And that's what the Ten Commandments teach us. That's why we need them, not to recite them, not to accessorize with them, certainly not to use them as stone bludgeons, as blunt instruments with which to bash someone else, but as the Word of God written on our hearts.

Will you pray with me:

O God, as you spoke so long ago through the prophet Ezekiel, give us new hearts, take away our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh, that all your children might more truly love you, and that we, in loving all your children as we love our own, might at last, even at this Eleventh Hour, bear fruit; and in bearing fruit, truly, and at last worthily, magnify Your holy Name, in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.