

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
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**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20**

**“The Problem with the Ten Commandments”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

On July 15, 2011, a federal judge ordered that a granite monument bearing the Ten Commandments be removed from outside the courthouse in Cross City, Dixie County, Florida. Since 2006, the 5-foot, 6-ton granite monument has been sitting in front of the courthouse. The large monument not only features the Ten Commandments but it has an additional phrase chiseled at the base that reads, “Love God and Keep His Commandments.”

Three months after the monument was erected, the ACLU of Florida sued to have the monument removed, saying that it violated the separation of church and state. The suit snaked through the court system over many years and just this past summer a judge ruled in favor of the ACLU and ordered that the monument be removed.

Howard Simon, executive director of the ACLU of Florida, said, “We hope that Dixie County officials will find a permanent place for it at a church or other house of worship, which is the appropriate place for religious monuments.”

Simon continued, “Removing the monument is the right thing to do. It is not the business of government to promote religious messages about monotheism, idolatry, taking the Lord’s name in vain, or honoring the Sabbath.”

Cases involving the display of the Ten Commandments on government land have gone all the way to the Supreme Court. And, over the years, a sharply divided Supreme Court HAS UPHELD the constitutionality of displaying the Ten Commandments on government land in certain circumstances. The Supreme Court has ruled that each individual case demands scrutiny and must be argued independently on a case-by-case basis.

Consequently, the court determined that framed copies of the Ten

Commandments in two Kentucky courthouses went too far in endorsing religion—those were found to be unconstitutional.

But a 6-foot-granite monument displaying the Ten Commandments on the grounds of the Texas State Capitol was determined to be a legitimate tribute to the nation's legal and religious history. And there it stands today.

I find some of the arguments used in support of displaying the Ten Commandments just fascinating. Many people argue that displaying the Ten Commandments on courthouse walls and in monuments in front of government buildings is justified because, they say, "This is a Christian nation." But the Ten Commandments are found in the Book of Exodus, which is part of the Torah, or what Christians call the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments are decidedly Jewish, they a part of Jewish law. So wouldn't that make us a "Jewish nation?" Christians do not actually have Ten Commandments: we have one. Jesus was very explicit about that. We have eight Beatitudes, but only one commandment: to love others as Jesus loved us.

But let's put aside the question of whether we are a Christian or a Jewish nation. And let's put aside the legal issues surrounding the separation of church and state. Let's focus instead on a fundamental problem inherent in prominently displaying the Ten Commandments in public places. **The problem is that if the Ten Commandments are prominently displayed, they might actually have to be prominently followed.** And actually following the Ten Commandments would pose huge challenges for the attorneys, judges, and elected officials and everyone who frequent city courthouses and government buildings.

Let's review the Ten Commandments and consider what it would mean if they were prominently displayed in the public square AND prominently followed:

1. *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.*

Okay, here we encounter our first problem with following the Ten Commandments. You shall have no other gods before me. If everyone who saw that displayed day-in and day-out really adhered to that commandment they would have to reflect on the gods—like wealth and power—they have put before the divine and Holy God. In this society, there certainly are false gods that are placed before our Holy God—the gods

of status, money, profit, social, economic and political power and influence are often valued and cherished more than our Holy God. We're only on the first commandment and already we see that prominently displaying these laws and actually following them are two very different things.

2. *You shall not make for yourself an idol, often translated you should not make or worship idols.*

This commandment poses a real problem too. Many folks who passionately advocate having the Ten Commandments prominently displayed in the public square also passionately advocate for a literal interpretation of the Bible and they elevate the very Bible to the level of idolatry. It is dangerous to make an idol out of the Bible. The Bible is meant to be studied and interpreted, understood in the context of its time, investigated and wrestled with. This second commandment forbids elevating even the Bible to the level of idolatry. This commandment presents a problem when we make the Bible itself an idol, and we worship the Bible rather than worshipping God.

3. *You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, often translated as do not take the Lord's name in vain.*

This is a challenge. "OMG" (O My God) is probably the most texted message in daily use today. I am reminded that President Obama once said of this then-Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel. "If Rahm really adhered to the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment, it would render him mute."

4. *Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work.*

This commandment, prominently displayed with the assumption that people will follow it, also presents a problem. If we actually adhered to THIS commandment we would not work, shop, or drive on the Sabbath. There goes all those Saturday trips to the Mall, no running around doing errands, buying groceries, picking up the dry cleaning. No work means no work.

We would actually have to walk everywhere, talk to each other, pray, stay home, visit with family, worship, and rest. That is all VERY counter-cultural. The 4<sup>th</sup> commandment poses a big problem for a drive-by, drive-through population that prides itself on always being "on the go."

5. *Honor your father and your mother.*

I think this commandment probably includes don't lead your elders into total impoverishment by taking away social security. Honoring our fathers and

mothers includes making sure our elders are emotionally, physically and financially safe and comfortable. In today's society, that's considered a tall order and maybe an unrealistic goal.

6. *You shall not murder, sometimes translated as you shall not kill.*

Now remember, these commandments, including this one, are currently TODAY prominently displayed on the grounds of the TEXAS State Capitol.

And yet Texas is the state that executes more inmates than any other state in the country—

an average of 22 executions a year. If Texans want to have the Ten Commandments displayed on the grounds of their State Capitol, I think they need to chisel an asterisk next to this commandment. And then at the bottom of the monument they can chisel in small print, "Unless you are the state of Texas, or one of the 38 states in the nation that allows the death penalty." The monument currently on the grounds of the Texas State Capitol really needs to include an asterisk and an explanation of how, with their devotion to the death penalty, they understand themselves to be the exception to the commandment that clearly says: you shall not kill.

7. *You shall not commit adultery.*

This is a tough one for so many of our elected officials. How do those men reconcile this commandment with their own behavior? I think this commandment probably means that the Governor of South Carolina cannot say that he is hiking the Appalachian Trail when he is actually in Argentina with his mistress.

8. *You shall not steal.*

Many law-makers, policy-makers and elected officials would say, wow, I have this one covered. I have never stolen as much as a bag of potato chips from Wal-Mart or Target. But the laws they are passing and the ones they are failing to pass amount to stealing the future from our children when it comes to climate change. With global warming looming as such an urgent issue in our time, our law-makers lack of leadership to reverse the warming of this planet IS stealing—stealing the future from the generations that follow by leaving them an increasingly uninhabitable home.

9. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor, often translated as you shall not lie.*

If they adhered to this commandment, many politicians would be quite

silent. Note that after every Presidential debate, the TV stations immediately feature “truth squads”—the fact checkers who dissect what was just said and then correct the record. The fact checkers take what was said and then actually tell the audience the truth. This ninth commandment would be a tough one for many elected officials to actually adhere to.

10. *You shall not covet your neighbor’s house or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

Okay this commandment poses a problem because it is a major threat to capitalism. If our society were to adhere to this commandment, the whole advertising industry would collapse. Advertising is built on making us covet things we do not have—a new car, flat screen TV, iPad, Michael Jordan sneakers, skinny jeans. Our market economy is based on coveting and greed. This commandment would be a very tough one for this supposedly “Christian” nation to follow.

Clearly I am far less worried about how and where the Ten Commandments are displayed than how thoroughly they seemed to be ignored. I am troubled by the fact that in this country today, the Ten Commandments are referenced, tossed around, displayed, quoted, and chiseled into granite but not followed.

However, the Ten Commandments are valuable guidelines for how to be relationship with God, and how to live in community. I love them, I honor their power, and I appreciate how they instruct and direct us to live moral lives as people of faith. AND I believe, as we do in the United Church of Christ, that God is Still Speaking, and that God has invited us to tinker with the Ten Commandments. The UCC loves to quote Gracie Allen who said, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” And I believe you can discern a tiny little comma after the tenth commandment and that God is quietly inviting us to reflect on what these ancient words mean to us today, and even to make them our own.

And so I close now with a new, simple version of the Ten Commandments that I have written. But there is one twist: they have all been re-written in the affirmative. Because the Ten Commandments found in the Bible are mainly written in the negative and tell us what NOT to do, I decided to take those as the foundation, the baseline and imagine them all written in the positive...sort of continuing what the original Ten Commandments say by

showing what we should aim for, what we CAN do rather than what we should avoid doing.

And so here they are—offered as a vision, a gentle nudge, a humble reflection for our consideration.

I commit to loving God more than I love things.

I commit to seeking and worshipping the living God—not symbols of God, stories about God, or images of God.

I will speak of God with reverence.

I will value rest and rejuvenation, cherish prayer and reflection, and devote time to just being with God.

I will honor elders and work to insure their safety and well being.

I will support life by weighing important decisions based on their effect on the next seven generations.

I will be faithful, loyal and trustworthy in my intimate relationship.

I will work to insure that future generations inherit a livable planet.

I will practice right speech.

I will share and act with generosity.

There they are...the Ten Commandments written in the affirmative as goals out there for us to work towards.

Maybe it matters less if the Ten Commandments are chiseled on granite monuments than if they are written on our hearts.

Imagine a world where they are actually honored and followed.

Imagine a world of fairness, equity, justice, compassion and peace.

Amen.