

July 22, 2018

TEXT: Exodus 20:14, Matthew 5:27–28, Romans 13:8–10

TITLE: Thou Shalt, Thou Shalt Not: Loyalties Deeper Than Legalities

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

There's an old joke about a drunk walking in circles around a lamppost late at night. A police officer came upon him and asked him what he's doing and the drunk said that he was looking for his keys. After helping him look for a few minutes, the officer asked if he was sure he dropped the keys near the lamppost. The drunk replied, "No, I lost the keys somewhere across the street." "So why are you looking here?" asked the surprised officer. The man replied, "Well, the light's so much better." There is a truth in this joke that will guide us as we explore together the Seventh Commandment.

If you ask someone to name some of the Ten Commandments, they will usually mention a few of the short ones: Thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery. That even happened in the verses from Romans that I just read. When Paul summarized the commandments, he only named four of them: no adultery, murder, stealing or coveting. What that grouping has in common is that they talk about actions that affect someone else. Don't murder someone else; don't steal from someone else; don't commit adultery with someone else. When we think about the Seventh Commandment, the inclination is to hear it as a law focused on one person's actions involving a second person, such as someone having sex with a person who isn't his or her spouse. But that narrow definition is like looking for your car keys under a lamppost because the light is better there—when the intent of this commandment is much broader and wider than that.

Having said all that, let's still start under the lamppost. Let's begin with a narrow definition of the Seventh Commandment: Thou shalt not commit adultery with another person. Why? Because it damages, if not destroys, the covenant of marriage. I'm officiating at seven weddings this year. The second one happened just yesterday as ----- said their vows and became husband and wife. Even when couples have known one another for quite some time, perhaps even living together or owning a home together, I always stress that a marriage ceremony marks a new chapter in their common story—not because of the dress and tuxedos, not because of the flowers, receptions or ceremony—but because of the vows they speak to one another. For same gender and different gender couples alike, they become different people when they hold hands and promise to be one another's spouse.

The playwright Thornton Wilder, best known for his play Our Town, wrote another one called The Skin of Our Teeth. Near the end of that play, a wife tells her husband these words: *I didn't marry you because you were perfect. I married you because you gave me a promise. (She takes off her ring.) That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage.*

It's true that as a minister, I act as a ward of the state and sign marriage licenses for the Allegheny County register of deeds. But that license doesn't make a marriage. The vows do. And when vows are not honored—when the promises are broken or destroyed by domestic abuse or willful indifference—that marriage has likely come to an end, regardless of the legalities and licenses on file. Keeping marriage vows requires courage. It requires daring to risk a love that is not about possession, but about participation. Keeping marriage vows is a daily act of reaffirmation, of saying “I choose you” over and over again, just as faith is daily saying “God, I'm with you” over and over again.

So, yes, adultery can be narrowly defined as a sinful act damaging the marriage covenant of two people. But it's also true that others are affected by these acts. Adultery harms at least one spouse, maybe two—not to mention children, in-laws, other relatives and friends. The rippling waves of those affected by acts of adultery are far-reaching. So at its heart, this prohibition against adultery is a commandment designed to protect lots of relationships, not just one marriage covenant. It warns us to remember that adultery pretends it is a secretive little act that doesn't hurt anyone else. But that is a lie told to mask the damage that is done to others; and that is the reason why this commandment is such a prominent one in God's Ten Commandments.

When the topic of adultery comes up in the bible, the focus is never on the narrow lamplight of a single, sinful act of betrayal; it is on the wider circle of lives affected once this commandment is broken. When Abraham was traveling through hostile territory on his way to Palestine, he passed off his wife Sarah as his sister, allowing her to be taken as one of the wives of the foreign king. This led to hardship in that land until the lie was revealed and the conspiracy of adultery was reversed (Gen 12 & 20). King David famously committed adultery with Bathsheba, abusing his power and destroying a trusted military commander in a tragic web of adulterous sin (2 Samuel 11 & 12). Later, in a story that is never preached upon in church, David's son Amnon fell in love with his half-sister Tamar, and ends up tricking her and raping her, only to toss her aside after his violent abuse (2 Samuel 13). The ripple effects of his actions led to war and violence and ultimately the splitting in half of David's entire royal kingdom.

Now, the cases I just mentioned were not solely about adultery. David and Bathsheba's story was about adultery, but Abraham's was about lying and deception while Amnon's was about rape and violence. God's commandments were never meant to be narrowly defined. Is not sexual harassment a type of adultery, diminishing the personhood of another and destroying the trust that should exist between two equals? Is not homophobia a type of adultery, denigrating loving relationships even within our own families? Does not pornography involve secrecy coupled with the physical denigration of another and thus fall within the purview of the Seventh Commandment?

A headline in yesterday's *Post-Gazette* told how the archivist for the Carnegie Library was charged with stealing over \$8 million of rare books and maps, taking them from the archives he'd been entrusted for over 25 years with preserving for all posterity. Isn't that

betrayal of trust and willful harming of community treasures a type of adulterous disloyalty against God and his neighbors here in Pittsburgh?

The Ten Commandments were never meant to be trifled with. They are meant to be seen as foundational laws guiding our lives and all our relationships. Yet, once we interpret them broadly, we recognize how we all fall short of their standards. That can be quite unsettling. What do we do then? Well, we balance law with grace—the Commandments with the gospel of Jesus Christ. That’s the beauty of the story from John 8, about the woman caught in the act of adultery. Notice the bias in this story. Although adultery by definition involves two people, only the woman is persecuted here. Only the woman is tossed at Jesus’ feet while a mob is ready to stone her. Notice the desire to punish her under the bright lamplight of self-righteousness while the mob refuses to acknowledge their own sins that are just as serious if you look a bit beyond the immediate area of focus. Jesus refuses to play by those rules. He expands their gaze beyond a narrow interpretation of this commandment and says “Whoever is without sin can cast the first stone.” Those in the mob leave convicted of their own sin and hopefully wiser for what they’d heard. And the woman also leaves, freed from the burden of her sin and restored to live as a child of God’s grace once more. Something more than legalities is at work here. Following the law is not how you earn God’s grace and favor. God’s grace gives us imperfect people the ability to honor the law, to love God and love our neighbor with full integrity.

For 27 years Nelson Mandela endured prison and solitary confinement on Robben Island. In celebration of what would have been his 100th birthday, a book of his letters from prison has just been released. In one letter he wrote in 1975, Mandela commented how people judge one another according to external factors like social position, popularity, education and wealth. He said this is perfectly understandable, but it is more crucial to assess one’s development as a human being according to internal qualities: Honesty, simplicity, sincerity, humility, generosity, the absence of vanity, and a readiness to serve others. He said these qualities are within easy reach of every soul and are the foundation of one’s spiritual life. (“A Saint is a Sinner Who Keeps On Trying,” Feb. 1, 1975)

He’s right. It is never just about diplomas, bank accounts, and even marriage licenses on file in the county office. It is about people-smarts, generosity with wealth, loyalty, mutuality, and trustworthiness in the covenant of marriage and in the covenantal relationships with others. As Mandela said, these qualities are available to every one of us and are the foundation of our spiritual life. May we treat wedding vows like faith vows, and faith vows like wedding vows. May we honor the Seventh Commandment in all our relationships—in plenty and want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and health, as long as we all shall live.

AMEN