

# By Heart

October 4, 2020

Did you have to memorize anything when you were younger? I don't know if it's done anymore, but when I was in school, there was still a lot of memorization. We learned the Gettysburg Address. My high school American history teacher made us memorize every single constitutional amendment. In fact, one whole exam was to simply write all of the constitutional amendments, word for word. And in Sunday School, we had to memorize the 10 Commandments.

It's interesting that this is called "learning by heart," because there's very little heart involved in it. Yes, at the time I could rattle off the Bill of Rights without missing a beat, but the heart and soul of each amendment, and the brilliance of the Constitution being a living document that grows with our community and our lived experience, was not part of our curriculum.

Years back, I remember a lay reader getting up to offer their scripture reading. I don't even remember who it was or what they were reading, except that it was a common passage, maybe the 10 Commandments. Before beginning, the reader said, "I don't quite understand why Bridget asked me to read this passage. You all already know it."

Oy! Yes, there are some passages that we know, maybe some that we've even memorized, but do we know them by heart?

There's an LGBTQIA Christian writers group called *enfleshed* who published a "remix" of the 10 Commandments a while back that I found absolutely stunning. It doesn't say anything NEW, but by putting this classic text in modern language, these writers breathe new life into a text that for many faithful has become a series of checkboxes. I went to church on Sunday: check. I didn't murder anyone this week: check.

And so I offer you this remix of the 10 Commandments as written by *enfleshed*, with a little commentary after each, with the hope that this will help us all to live them more fully, live them—by heart. But before we dive into the commandments themselves, it would serve us well to recall the function the 10 Commandments serve. Many understand the 10 Commandments to be a list of personal, ethical, or moral instructions — do this / don't do that. Taken in context, however, the 10 Commandments serve to provide a set of communal expectations which would create a vibrant, cohesive community out of a wandering band of fugitive slaves. By embracing this list of expectations and responsibilities, the Jews transition into a people, at God's behest.

Now, on to the actual list.

The **first commandment**, as I learned it, is "**I am the LORD, your God, you shall not have false gods before me.**" We've talked before about false gods, about how tempting it is to make wealth or security your god. In today's culture, I'd encourage us all to reflect on whether individualism – and its ugly underbelly self-centeredness – has become a particularly American god which we revere. Unfortunately, one of the problems with false gods is that they're persuasive. They rarely say, "I'm trying to steal your allegiances away from that which is really important. Worship me!"

That's why it's so interesting that enfleshed interprets this commandment as "Practice loyalty to the sacred." Hmmmm. I find that helpful. Discern, determine what is sacred, and be loyal to it. God, and the ways of God — honesty, integrity, mercy, compassion, both the common good and the value of each individual, rise up to being worthy of our loyalty. Selfishness and greed and me first do not, but we'll talk more about those later.

Do you remember what the **second commandment** is? (Who knew there would be a quiz today?) This is actually a trick question because different churches actually number the first few slightly differently! For our purposes today, the second commandment is "**You shall not create any graven images.**" Some communities interpret this to mean that any depictions of God are forbidden.

Once again, enfleshed helps this commandment to be much more meaningful by interpreting it as "Remember every image of God is only a glimpse." This is helpful. God is not an old white man with a beard sitting on a cloud. As much as Hollywood would like us to believe, God also is not Morgan Freeman. Reminding ourselves that everything we say about God, everything we sing, everything we depict, is going to be partial helps keep us from falling into idolatry.

The **third commandment** is one that I think is almost universally misunderstood, "**You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.**" Raise your hand if you were taught that this means "no swearing," or at least you should not say "God damn" or, in some traditions, even "Oh my God!" (I know. I can't see you raising your hand, but movement helps you to stay engaged!)

Rather than swearing, enfleshed interprets this commandment to say, "Do not use God's name to do harm." This is where I think this remix really starts to sing. At the end of the day, an exclamation doesn't do harm. But not hurting people in the name of God, not excluding them in the name of God, not manipulating them in the name of God — now THAT is something that's worthy of making the top ten list.

Now, do not go off and tell people that your pastor encouraged you to swear in today's sermon. No, at minimum, swearing displays a lack of creativity. However, this commandment isn't about creativity or intelligence or even about reverence. Remember, the commandments are about creating community. Not doing harm to another in the name of God needs to be one of our central ethics.

**Fourth**, is "**Keep holy the Sabbath.**" Almost as misunderstood as taking God's name in vain, keep holy the Sabbath has been interpreted as both "You can't do ANYTHING on the Sabbath," and as "You must spend one hour, no more, no less, in a church building on Sunday." Neither of those could be farther from the intent of this commandment.

Enfleshed helps by reinterpreting this as, "Do not allow productivity to dominate life." Remember that in Deuteronomy, we hear that the reason for this commandment is so that we remember that God liberated us from slavery and that we are never to allow ourselves to be enslaved by anything again. Do not allow productivity to dominate life. Do not be enslaved — to your work, to your lawn, to your kids' sports. Do not allow productivity to dominate life.

**Fifth** as I learned them, is “**Honor your father and your mother.**” My dad used to joke that this is the most important one. In a community in which family configurations are varied, I find the en fleshed remix to be wonderfully fitting: “Care for those who have cared for you and honor those who have paved your way.” What a meaningful way to bring depth and dignity to this commandment.

For too long, people – especially LGBTQIA folx – have been trapped under their parents’ thumbs, have lived partial lives, or have hidden who they are because of constrictive interpretations of honoring their parents. Caring for those who have cared for us and honoring those who have paved our way allows room for both a breadth of family configurations and for not sublimating personal psycho-spiritual health to the views and mindsets of our elders.

**Sixth** is “**Thou shall not murder.**” This one’s easy, right? Well, at least for most of us—on most days. But is attempted murder okay? Is maiming or torturing allowed? In this traditional language, they’re not forbidden ...

Our remix interprets this commandment as, “Do not be unnecessarily destructive.” I still think “Thou shall not murder” is important, but “Do not be unnecessarily destructive” puts some meat on it, helps us to see that violence and destruction, in all of their guises, break our relationships with each other, with God, with ourselves, and with the earth.

**Seventh** (we’re in the home stretch) is “**You shall not commit adultery.**” Sadly again, this commandment is often interpreted in very limited fashion and therefore loses its power.

So instead, en fleshed interprets it as “Be faithful to the commitments you make.” This puts some substance on this commandment, not just in marital relationships, but throughout our lives. Be faithful. In some ways, I believe fidelity is a lost virtue. (More on that some other day.)

**Eighth, “Thou shall not steal.”** Now, much like “Thou shall not murder,” this one might need to be spelled out this explicitly. Our remix phrases it, “Do not take what does not belong to you.” I feel like we do need to be as blunt as “Thou shall not steal,” that we need to add “Do not take what does not belong to you,” and that we need even more. I’d add, “Do not take advantage of others.” Maybe I’m thinking this way because the company through which the church gets its phone service is trying to raise our rates by over 330%, but stealing is not just overtly pocketing something at the store, it is also charging exorbitant rates and hiding behind legalese to do it.

**Ninth**, in traditional language is “**You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**” Here again, our remix helps this to not just be a checkbox, “I didn’t lie,” by interpreting it as “Do not hinder justice from coming to fruition.” In our world today, as words have become weapons used to twist, hide, manipulate, and gaslight others, to understand this commandment robustly as “Don’t hinder justice from coming to fruition” is such a poignantly relevant ethic.

And lastly, when I was memorizing the Ten Commandments, **number 10** was “**You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or your neighbor’s goods.**” Of course, even the language of this one is exclusive. As written, it only applies to hetero men who would be inclined to covet their neighbor’s wife. (And don’t get me started on how pejorative it is to be lumped in with the cattle as something to be coveted!)

Thankfully, the good folk at enfleshed offer this for their remix: “Do not use power over others to get what you want.” Yeah, we’re back to power. Work honestly and fairly, and whatever power you have, use it wisely and well, not to control others, not to manipulate, not to trick or undermine.

Friends, part of why we memorize things is to have them at the ready in our brains long after the test is over, long after the schoolroom (or Sunday schoolroom) has faded from our memories. And while this tool has its merits, even though we call it learning “by heart,” it doesn’t have heart.

I’ll include this remix of the commandments in our weekly email next week and post it on the church’s Facebook page when we’re done here today because I think this fresh language helps our living of the commandments. This set of ethical imperatives set forth to create a healthy community, gives heart and soul and breath to what has otherwise become just a dusty list people imagine they only have to engage at a bare minimum to please God.

My prayer this week, as we celebrate World Communion Sunday, is that more and more of us will embrace these commandments with our hearts, and in doing so, we will, together, bring our communities closer to the reign of justice and peace.

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