


SHARES THE
WORSHIP OF GOD
March 3, 2024
The Third Sunday of Lent

PLYMOUTH



PULPIT

*We're really sorry.
We had a really nice picture
illustrating the eighth commandment
for this order of worship,
but someone took it.
Why would someone
do that?*

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“The Larceny in Our Hearts”

Exodus 20:15

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You must not steal.

—Exodus 20:15

A couple from Iowa went to Manhattan for the weekend. He wanted to get an early start, so he left the hotel while she was sleeping to get breakfast. As he walked down the street, someone bumped into him. He had been warned about New York, so he reached into his pocket. His wallet was missing.

He saw the man who bumped him running for the subway. He was furious, so he took off after him, chased him down, caught him, knocked him down, reached into the man's pocket, and got his wallet. Now he didn't know what to do with the guy. He knew that pressing charges would take the whole day, so he just shook the man really hard, and then turned him loose.

By this time he was so upset he didn't feel like breakfast, so he went back to the hotel.

When he walked into the room, he said to his wife, "I didn't get to eat breakfast."

She said, "I know, you left your wallet on the dresser."

When we think about the commandment not to steal, we think it is someone else who is breaking it—a pickpocket, a shoplifter, an embezzler. We think about the eighth commandment when we are the ones who have been ripped off. Property crimes occur every five seconds in the United States. 43% of Americans say they have had a package stolen. <https://www.adoorn.com/blogs/news/a-complete-look-at-package-theft-statistics/>. When we think of stealing, we think of people who are not as good as we are.

This commandment is straightforward. No stealing. Not much room for interpretation. The two Hebrew words *lo teeg-nov* should be translated, “Don’t steal.” It means exactly what it meant to the ancient Israelites—don’t take what doesn’t belong to you. Don’t steal.

Is there any part of this we don’t understand? Don’t steal. Don’t do it. Stealing is out, not an option. Don’t burglarize, embezzle, pilfer, defraud, or misappropriate funds.

This command is so clear that this sermon could end now. I had a long week, so I was tempted to preach five minutes and say, “I don’t want to steal any more of your time.” My fear was that if I preached the shortest sermon ever, it might be met with applause, and applause in worship makes me crazy. I also did not want you to say it was my best sermon.

But why would we think any more about this commandment when it seems easy to follow? “Thou shalt not steal” does not say much to most of us, unless it is a crime to take financial advantage in ways that do not seem like stealing. Unless it is complicated.

A man and his daughter received an extra \$400 from an ATM. What would you do? The father planned to return the money to the bank in the morning, but he was curious about what his daughter would do if it were up to her.

The daughter said, “I would return it, unless I really needed it.”

She sounds like Yogi Berra who when asked, “What would you do if you found a million dollars?” said, “I’d give it back if the guy who lost it was poor.”

The second part of the daughter's sentence, "unless I really needed it," broke her father's heart. The daughter grew up to be a rabbi, Rachel Mikva. She often uses this situation to ask teenagers what they would do.

Some say, "It's the bank's responsibility to keep the machines working. It's their fault."

Others tried, "It's so little money for a bank. No one is hurt by keeping it."

Or "You know they charge for every little transaction, even to get our own money back from them. This is just payback."

Some went the way of justification, "I would keep it, but give some of it to charity."

Many said they would return the money.

No one answered like we might want to: "I would go back and accept a couple more \$400 gifts" (Rachel Mikva, *Broken Tablets*, Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 1999, 99).

What do we do when it does not feel like stealing? How do we sell a used car with an oil leak? How honest do we have to be on our income taxes? What is stealing where we work? According to one estimate, the average worker spends two hours each day at work on personal matters.

Some stealing does not feel like stealing, but Dante said, "The swindler is deeper in hell than the mugger."

But maybe this commandment does not include the quiet ways we take what is not ours. Maybe we are completely off the hook with this one. Perhaps the commandment not to steal does not have anything to say to us, unless it is a crime to keep for ourselves what others need.

Is it stealing not to share your loaf of bread with a hungry family? Stealing is not a crime against property. It is a crime against people.

A young woman from the Dominican Republic lives in Washington Heights. She is the mother of two. There are not many job opportunities available to her other than working as domestic help.

She gets a job with a nice family in Brooklyn Heights. She works eight to five weekdays. She tends to the children. She cooks. She cleans. She makes \$16 an hour.

Her employers are churchgoers. Both are partners in their firms. They are involved in charitable work. And yet, with no qualms of conscience, in the name of the going rate, they are willing to take labor from this woman, who is unable with her wages to provide her children with adequate housing, decent clothing, a healthy diet. They would never think they are breaking the eighth commandment. That kind of stealing is so common we do not even think about it.

Is it wrong to pay people \$16 an hour, \$33,000 a year, and expect them to feed a family? If we keep what we have and others starve, is that stealing? Do we owe people our compassion and care? If we value our possessions more than we value other people, are we breaking the eighth commandment?

The difficulty, of course, is that most of us who are rich did not “try” to be rich. We were just lucky. But we want to believe we somehow deserved our wealth. The idea that we might be rich because we benefited from a system that is built on theft is hard to take.

So how do we keep this commandment? The only way

to be sure is to give like God gives. This commandment was meant to keep the Hebrew people on a higher plane. Israel's penalties for robbery were much less than the extreme penalties of other nations. The Babylonians had the death penalty for stealing.

The Assyrians mutilated thieves (Roy Honeycutt, *These Ten Words*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966, 96).

The general practice in Israel was to pay back what had been taken. Some laws called only for double restitution, because they understood that ultimately, God is the owner of everything. God has given us enough resources so that no one should go hungry or lack basic necessities. When we have more than we need and others do not have what they need, we are in danger of being devoured by greed.

"You must not steal" is a call to treat others with respect. The Israelites' laws not only forbid taking what is not ours, but in many instances demand that we share what we have. Gleanings from the field have to be left for the poor. Every hungry passerby has the right to eat when walking through a vineyard.

Our perspective is that what we have belongs to us: "I earned it. I paid for it. I saved it."

But we are mistaken if we interpret "you will not steal" as security for what belongs to us. This commandment is an invitation to share what belongs to God. This commandment was given not to protect our property, but to protect us from self-centeredness.

In Jesus' day there was a government official, whose job was to collect taxes. The rule was that he could take a portion over the amount of the taxes he raised. The man was a hard worker and a shrewd bookkeeper and he did

well. He owned a nice house and had plenty to eat, but one day the rich man met Jesus, and Zacchaeus was never the same.

Something profound happened. He said, "I've decided to give half my wealth to the poor. And if I've cheated anyone, I'll pay it back four times over."

This is the way of Christ, the way of giving, and the way of God's love.

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