Rev. Dr. Suzanne Allen

First United Methodist Church

Springboro, Ohio

August 30, 2015

Series: “Big 10+”

Message: “Big 10+”

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-6

 It’s football season. When we talk about the Big 10, our minds immediately turn to college football. Today we’re beginning our fall worship series on the original Big 10, the 10 Commandments. My hope is that as we go through this series, that as you cheer for the Big 10 teams, you’ll also think of the 10 Commandments and living them out in a life of faith.

 Aside from football, when you think about the 10 Commandments, what comes to mind? Maybe a scene from the movie with Charlton Heston’s dramatic poses?

 When I think of the 10 Commandments, I think of a plate that sat on a plate stand in my Grandma Allen’s kitchen. Every once in a while I would stop and read through the commandments and especially after Confirmation when we had to memorize them, I would stop and quiz myself to see if I remembered them all.

 Did anyone else here have one like that? I’m going to have ask my parents if that one is still around.

 It wasn’t a plate my grandma often talked about unless we asked her. But it was important to her. Even as styles changed and she downsized from house to apartment, she kept it. It was a sign of who she was and how she chose to live.

 Perhaps you think of the public debates in the headlines a while back, over whether to display the commandments in public buildings. At that time, about 85% of Americans were in favor of displaying them, but curiously only about 40% of the population could name more than five.

 Stephen Colbert interviewed a district representative who had made the commandments a key part of his platform, and even he couldn’t name more than five.

 I’d ask you, but you’ve just heard them and seen them, so I hope you’ll remember more than 5.

 Honestly though, many of us fall into this category. We are for the 10 Commandments in general, and we try to follow them in our lives, but to actually name them specifically is harder. Hopefully we know a little more than the average person surveyed, but we could learn more by revisiting the commandments and giving them our focus for the season.

 And as we do, to reflect not just on how well we know them and live them, but on how we’re passing them on. How well do my kids know this version of the Big 10? I don’t have a plate in my kitchen with them on it, so how am I living them out and sharing the reason behind my way of life?

 So, if you do happen to know all ten, another interesting question is, “which version do you know?” The good news is we can say, the one in the Bible, found in Exodus 20:1-12a. But there are at least three different ways of numbering those verses. A lot of the difference has to do with the verses we’re looking at today. The Jewish and Orthodox traditions find two commandments in there. The Anglican, Reformed and other Christians say there is a preface and two commandments, and the Catholics and Lutherans make all these verses into one commandment. So if you come across different ways of numbering them, that’s why.

 But it’s okay, because it’s all the same verses of the Bible. And that’s the thing about the 10 Commandments, it’s not about whether we know them on the spot or how we number them, or even whether they are on the walls of our public buildings. The real issue, question, is whether we have a relationship with them, and even more, do we have a relationship with the one who speaks them? Do we trust that one who speaks them enough to make them a part of who we are and choose to be?

 This brings us to what we in the Anglican/Reformed tradition call the prologue: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of slavery.”

 This is not a commandment, but a statement that establishes relationship. This is not just any god making demands on the people. This is the God who had sought them out and established a covenant relationship with them. This is the God who when they cried out from captivity in Egypt heard their cries and rescued them from Pharaoh’s hand and lead them through the wilderness to the promised land.

 This is the God who speaks to them directly, “I am.” I am the God who has freed you, cared for you, led you, loved you, who wants to set you apart to be a holy people blessed with abundant life. This is a God who is hopelessly devoted to His people.

 The commandments begin in relationship. As we acknowledge the way God is so devoted and faithful to us, then living the commandments is our response to God. We return that devotion and faithfulness through obedience.

 Then the first word, or commandment, is “You shall have no other gods before me.” God has loved us, saved us. How could we put anything before this God who is so devoted to us? The commandment calls us to appreciate and to give our loyalty to God first and to not let anything come in the way of that loyalty.

 But there are in life, those things that creep in, that divide our loyalty, that eventually drive a wedge between us and God. We might call these things idols, which of course, leads us to the second commandment on not worshiping idols.

 When we hear about idol worship, we have a tendency to think of idols as other gods, little statues carved from rock or something like that.

 But idols can be anything that we trust and believe in with our whole self. Martin Luther says a ‘god’ is a term for that to which we are to find refuge in all need.” Who do you go to, trust in tough times? Who do you believe in completely? That is your God or your god.

 Patrick Miller talks about the fact that while today we aren’t tempted to worship small stone statues, we certainly know about divided loyalties in our lives. We are pulled in so many directions and there are so many demands on our time. The idols are the things that creep in and pull us away from God and keeping God first.

 When we do this, we lose sight of the bigger picture of life. Joan Chittister says this may be the easiest commandment to break and the one that harms us most.

 It harms us when we take life and love and freedom for granted. We forget what has been done for us and we think we’re self-made and self-sufficient. We worship ourselves, we worship absolutes and our version of truth, and we make God in our image. We assume that salvation can come from places and relationships other than God.

 We need to be reminded of our relationship with God, to be urged to keep God first, to have no other gods, idols, activities or people that undermine our relationship with God.

 Willimon and Hauerwas put it so well: “That is the first commandment, to stop attempting to get something out of God and instead bend our lives toward God. It is only in worship, in this constant repetitious (it must be habitual, weekly because it is so against our sinful inclination) bending of our lives toward God, that we are freed from the idolatries that constantly threaten.”

 We worship God each week as a way of keeping God first, so that we remember that we are not a free people, but a freed people. We have been freed by a God who is devoted to us, who is so passionate about us that he came in the flesh and gave everything for our salvation.

 He gave it all. And in response he asks for our all, for us to worship him alone. And when we do, he will lead us to life—abundant life.

 Today, whether it is for the first time or the forty first time, I invite you to put God first, to worship Him alone, to give Him your all with faithful obedience and with gratitude, mercy and thanksgiving to the one who hears our cries for mercy, who comes to us and frees us, and leads us to be a holy people.