

Sunday, August 7, 2022 Pentecost 9 ***“Thou Shalt Not Steal”***

Exodus 20:15 Exodus 22:7-8, Ephesians 4:25-28, Matthew 6:19-20

We continue in our Summer Worship Series of “At Your Request” with our topic for today being “Thou Shalt Not Steal.” Our first to this statement might be yes this is the one of the Ten Commandments Moses received on the tablets at Mount Sinai as briefly stated in the passages Pam read. The message is clearly put in four words: thou- you; shall not- will not steal- take something that does not belong to you. One might think that this is very clear but these commandments do have clarifications and the repercussions of not following these four words might seem harsh, or even extreme. What happens if someone does steal something from an individual? What happens if the object was given to another for safekeeping and then stolen? Who are the victims then? And what if what is stolen belongs to a group of people and there is a question of what is required to bring restitution?

Thou shalt not steal. When God gave these commandments or rules of living to Moses, the chosen people had not yet established a home from Egypt. They were wandering in the desert. Chaos and restlessness and in some moments, a lack of hope ensued. Some of the people thought they should return as slaves under Pharaoh. But if we continue to read in Exodus, God did not just give these four words without any support for what is to happen with loss, restitution and penalties. This is what is presented not as ‘if’ it happens, but when. “When someone steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters or sells it, the thief shall pay 5 oxen of an ox and four sheep for a sheep. IF the animal is found alive the thief shall pay double. And when someone delivers money or goods to a neighbour for safekeeping, and this is stolen, then the thief if caught shall pay double. If the thief is not caught, the neighbour is questioned before God for questioning and resolution.”

One might think why did God assume that these laws of restitution were necessary? Because the people were already stealing from each other, killing the desired livestock of their neighbours, and seeking to gain money for what was not theirs in the first place. So what is it that concerns us about this commandment?

Just think about this in today's world. People walk into a store and you are being watched through mirrors, video surveillance, and yet shoplifting occurs. Sometimes this is done by people on a dare from their friend group, other times it is out of desperation for need. But the result is the same: higher costs to the consumer through lost revenue to the store, taxes to be paid by the merchant and the store needing to increase security measures. Theft deprives the rightful owner of the property and if a person is found to be guilty of theft, the conviction could result in the consequences of fines, incarceration, and probation. But what of the victim of theft what happens to them? And where might one find justice restored?

If you have ever been a victim of theft there is a sense of vulnerability and wonder as to why would anyone want to have your possessions, or what is so important to risk one's life and future life to take something that belongs to another person? Today however theft may occur without the thief entering another's household. In Moses time, the loss of livestock meant there was lack of animals to do the labour required, there was less food possible and this might mean that families would struggle to live and/or continue in their journey to the Promised Land.

But what kinds of stealing takes place today? When one turns on the news we hear about break and enter, petty theft, auto theft, shoplifting and armed robbery. This is all stealing in some form. Other forms of stealing includes identity theft, fraud and plagiarism- the stealing of other people's thoughts- a big problem in universities and colleges. How do we stop it? Usually with repercussions under the law there is a need to justify the losses.

We hear police officers telling us about the latest scam and to not to give out information over the phone to people whom we are unsure about. We are also told to be careful of websites that advertise bargains or raise our awareness of issues affecting others' well-being. If we give information that leads to charges on credit cards there is not much that can be done but to follow the sales with police help. This is all forms of stealing as the person who wants your credit numbers really wants to find out your banking information to take what is yours.

As people of faith, we believe that most people are good and want to live a good life and sharing and loving others. For some people however, times may be tough and to look at what others' have leads them to thinking what they might do in order to get it. They want to beat the system and mostly just don't want to get caught.

But Jesus tells us something different with regard to possessions. He does not teach about the laws and restitution regarding our stolen items. Jesus states clearly that where our treasure is, there your heart will be. We read in Matthew 6, that instead of watching out for someone who might steal our possessions, we are to be ready and prepared for what is to come and to live in faith. Jesus said, "Don't store up treasures on earth where they may be consumed or destroyed by moth and rust, or even stolen by thieves who break in and steal. He teaches us that we are store up for ourselves treasures in heaven. Treasures in heaven are treasures that are eternal and will last.

We live in a passing world with passing fancies and fads. An old pastor has been quoted as saying, that no U-Haul trailer follows a hearse. Treasures in heaven are treasures that no one can take from your car, bank account, wallet or house. We centre our lives around what we value most. If we prioritize the wrong things, our lives will go off the rails and this is when we must consider what we all treasures. The question you need to reflect upon is what are the treasures in your life?

Jesus continues to teach us that it is necessary to be watchful, yes but only God knows what will happen. We are to keep aware for we don't know on what day Jesus will come again. Nor do we know that as owners of house we will not know when a thief might come, but as Christ has promised, he will return. We need to be ready for this. Just like a home owner we need to be ready and watching. (Matthew 24:44-46)

In writing to the church at Ephesus, Paul explains to the church the difference of those who have hardness of heart and have not learned the way of Christ and those who know Jesus within. Paul states that those who follow Christ, put away the former way of life and are renewed in the spirit of minds. They are clothed in righteousness and in the likeness of God. They choose to live Christ's way and speak the truth to others. Paul also instructs that yes you

may become angry but do not sin. And he states that one should not let the sun go down on anger. And don't make room for the devil to enter. This is when one becomes hard hearted and indifferent to the needs of others. Thieves must give up stealing. They must also labour and work honestly with their own hands so as to have something to share with those in need. (Ephesians 4)

Paul emphasizes two things about those who steal- 1) they must give it up and 2) they must work honestly for a specific purpose. This purpose is to help those who are needy. Paul does not state why thieves stole in the first place- but tells them to stop and work in order to help others. This is a major shift in what one says and does. It is a transformation in life—from getting what belongs to others to working for what one has and then giving it to others in need.

Stealing may be caused by jealousy, low self-esteem, or peer-pressure. Social issues like feeling excluded or overlooked can also cause stealing. People may steal to prove their independence, to act out against family or friends, or because they don't respect others or themselves. But there is hope which is not easily accomplished. It takes God's Spirit to open the hearts of people who steal and come to know that they may be forgiven. It also takes a community of faithful people who believe that this transformation is possible. So it is our task to share the message of God's love and hope. It is our job to not condemn the thief, but to see why things were taken and to encourage them to seek change in Christ.

As we consider God's commandment "Thou shall not steal" we must also consider how we might open the hearts of those would be thieves who are searching for something they do not have. This something might even be Jesus in their lives. As Christians we believe Jesus came to teach us to live and love others. Yes we will and do sin, but we are also forgiven through Christ. IT is this story of forgiveness that those who steal need to hear in order to restore and transform their lives.

Four simple words to live by- yet enable all who believe to pray for the one who steals for they are in need of Christ's love and forgiveness. Let us reflect on this as we consider the wonder and love of Christ as we seek to store our treasures in heaven. Let us pray:

Holy God of grace and love, we praise you for Christ's teachings on stealing and how it hurts so many. Help us to be prepared for our lives and to show by touch and word what Christ has taught us as we seek to know his love. Call us O God to reach out in peace and with hope as we pray for your Spirit to change our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.