

Moving Closer to God

Dedication of Leyton Regehr:

Raising children is an act of faith in the God of life, who mothers and fathers us all. We welcome children warmly into this congregation.

Following Jesus' example, we bless you, *Leyton*, and you, *Justin & Tiffany*, (and *Logan & Landon*) as you are already a blessing to us.

Do you accept *Leyton* as a gift of God?

We do.

Receiving the gift of faith, will you show *Leyton* what it means to live in the way of Jesus?

We will.

Trusting in God's grace, will you freely surrender *Leyton* to the leading of the Holy Spirit, even when God calls to the ends of the earth?

We will.

Surrounded by God's love, do you invite our community of faith to join you in caring for *Leyton*?

We do.

Empowered by the Spirit, we promise to help *Leyton* learn the joy and challenge of discipleship and experience God's love.

Congregation Response:

We rejoice with you & give thanks for the gift of Leyton. With God as our guide, we will share in his nurture and well-being. We will support by our example & words, your efforts to provide a loving and caring home, where trust in God grows and Christ may be known. Our prayers are with you and for you. May our shared life and witness help you grow as a family in faithfulness and joy.

Scripture Reading:

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

- You must have no other gods before me.
- Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the LORD your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.
- Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance; the Lord won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.
- Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you. Because the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
- Honor your father and your mother so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the LORD your God is giving you.
- Do not kill.

- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not steal.
- Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.
- Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's house. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the horn, and the mountain smoking, the people shook with fear and stood at a distance. They said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we'll listen. But don't let God speak to us, or we'll die." Moses said to the people, "Don't be afraid, because God has come only to test you and to make sure you are always in awe of God so that you don't sin."

Ex. 20:1-20 (C.E.B.)

For the Adults:

I don't know how many of you remember the 1995 movie, *Mr. Holland's Opus*. It's a story about a musician and his career as a high school music teacher, a career he began reluctantly. At the end of his career, he sees the faces of the many, many, many lives he had touched.

Early in the movie, the principal at the school offers her insight and advice to this young, new teacher. She reminds him that his job is to do more than feed young minds with information; he is also called to give them direction in life so they might know what to do with that information. At her retirement, she gives Mr. Holland a compass because he had become so good at giving direction to his students.

Those of you who remember the movie know there is much more to the story than that, but I found myself remembering and pondering the compass. I was reminded of that as I thought about what it means for the life of Leyton. In many ways, his parents will have the primary task of helping him to sort through and make sense of the things he will learn.

At the same time, we, the church, are an important part of that process as well. Whether we teach Sunday School or simply show up on Sunday morning, we are teaching Leyton how to navigate life's journey. As Mr. Holland did with his students, we will help Justin and Tiffany give direction to Leyton. It's part of what we meant when we said "we will support, by our example and words, your efforts" to help Leyton trust in God.

¹

But I also know that a compass alone is not enough. You need both a compass and a map. You need to know where you are on the map and you need to know where you are going. Only then is a compass of any use to you. If you don't know where you are, or if you don't know where you are heading, you can't know which direction to go.

As important as a compass might be, it's not enough.

During the days of the California Gold Rush, a young man and his bride joined hundreds of others as they set out across the country to make their fortune. Somewhere along the way, they drank some contaminated water, and the young bride became ill. She died on June 2, 1852.

Heartbroken, the young man took her body to the nearest, highest hill in the Nebraska sandhills and buried her, using the wagon bed to make a coffin. He drove some wooden stakes to mark the grave, planning to continue his journey and come back later.

¹ Liturgical response used during the dedication of Leyton, from *Voices Together*, # 970

But the more he thought about it, the more he was certain he couldn't go on. He said to himself, "I'll forget where this is; I'll never remember it." So, instead of heading West, he turned East and returned to St Louis. There he found a stonecutter and had a tombstone made for his wife, Susan Hail.

He tried to get someone to carry the stone, but everyone heading West already had full wagons. So he bought a wheelbarrow, put the stone in it, and walked back to where he had buried his wife. That stone still stands there, telling every passerby that Susan Hail had lived and died. Her burial place was not and is not forgotten.²

But it would have been completely forgotten if her widowed husband didn't know where he was going. And a compass alone would not have helped.

In my mind, the Ten Commandments are very much like a compass. They are useful. They are important. For travelers on the journey of life, in fact, they are essential. But not if we forget where we are going, and not if we don't know where we are.

So, where are we?

And where are we going?

And how can we make use of this vital compass we have before us today?

There are two answers to the first question of where we are. We are, first and foremost surrounded by the love of God. We are beloved children of God. We are always in the presence of God who has called us and who has chosen us. As we sang about Leyton earlier, God claims us – not just Leyton, but everyone here.³

So the first answer to the question of where we are is surrounded by God's love.

The other answer to where we are can be found in our text this morning, in the story that frames the Ten Commandments. The people are afraid to be close to God, so they send Moses to speak directly to God (Ex. 20:19). Like them, we don't want to be too close to God either, so we find ourselves "standing at a distance" along with the people of Israel (Ex. 20:18, 21). We seem to like it better there.

We used to have a dog who made several paths through our back yard. Most of them were next to the fence. She preferred to stand at the edge of the yard rather than in the center. When we were first training her to walk with a leash, she walked at the edge of the rope, too. It didn't matter how short or how long the leash, she walked at the edge, pulling it tight every step we took.

The same could be said for most of us. We prefer to know where the edge is. We want to know the limits placed on us. Children especially seem to want to find that edge, that limit. But the truth is we all spend our lives at the edge. All you have to do is keep up with traffic to know we do that! No one – at least not many people – drive below the posted limit, even though it's considered the *maximum* safe speed.

When I got my first new car, I made a conscious decision to always stay below the speed limit. I knew it was more fuel efficient, I knew it was safer. So I intentionally stayed 10% under the posted limits. If the speed limit was 65, I drove at 59. If it was 35, I drove at 32. It became a habit for many years.

² I thought this might be an old, apocryphal preacher's story until I found it told at <http://www.kansasheritage.org/werner/emigrave.html>

³ As part of the dedication, we sang "God Claims You," by Stanley M. Farr.

Those were in the days before there was cruise control, however, and so every once in a while, I'd forget. I'd find myself speeding up. Little by little. And without fail, every time I exceeded the limit, I got a speeding ticket.

It wasn't until several years later that I realized my speedometer was off. When it said I was doing 50, I was actually doing 55! When it said I was doing 60, I was actually going over 65! No wonder I was stopped every time I went over the speed limit.

I don't drive that way anymore; and at times I wonder why – probably because there is so much more traffic now. It's harder to drive slower. It was a good habit to have, though. But I've become like everyone else. I'm in a hurry to get home or I'm running late and trying to make up for lost time. I want to push the limits set before me.

So, where are we? We're wrapped in the loving arms of God while we are trying to keep our distance by pushing the limits.

Meanwhile, God is coaxing us to stand closer. God is calling us to be in close fellowship. God is inviting us to stand in the center of life rather than at the edge.

When he speaks about the commandments, Jesus suggests that we look toward the ideal of faithfulness rather than looking toward the line beyond which we fail. Rather than trying to define what the commandment means about killing, for example, Jesus tells us not to denigrate the life of another by calling them names (Mt. 5:22).

And so, we come to the second question of where it is we are going and we find an invitation to move toward God. The first line of the Ten Commandments reveals that best, I think. God says, "I am the LORD your God" (Ex 20:2). God is inviting us to be partners in life. God encourages us to head into the open arms of God's love.

That is what the whole Bible is about. Telling us where it is that we are going. The Ten Commandments spring directly from naming the destination of our journey. If we are heading toward God, then this is the path to follow.

In fact, there are those who suggest there really is only one commandment here: "I am the LORD your God." The rest are footnotes. All the others are sermons on the first. All the others are helping us look toward the goal of life, the source of life, the purpose in life.

"I am the LORD your God." It's as simple as that.

But as simple as that is, it's also quite frightening. Because if the LORD is indeed our God, then other things in our lives must change.

No more worship of the false gods of our culture. Those gods include football, for those who are wondering. It's also things like baseball, apple pie (or peppernuts), and patriotism. Things like retirement funds and vacations. Things like new cars and good health care plans.

And the truth is we are all guilty. At some level, we all want to stand at a distance. We all want to keep one foot in this world and its pleasures while hoping to find a place in God's world.

And when we are confronted with it, we're rather like the people of Israel who would rather have Moses go talk to God, who would rather have Moses hear God's voice directly, who would rather stand at a distance and offer praise to God without offering our whole lives.

In other words, we have the compass; we just don't want to use it.

Mr. Holland was given a compass. He knew how to use it. He also taught his students how to use it effectively. It's a lesson I think we can all reflect on today.

Look at where we are.

Look at where God is inviting us.

Look at the tools God has given us to get there.

And let's step forward in faith. Trusting God's love to carry us where we are weak and feeble. Trusting in God's grace to forgive us when we lose our sense of direction.

Most importantly, let's teach our children how to draw closer to God by using the tools of our faith on their life's journey. Those tools include the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes and the experience of those on the journey who walk alongside us.

For Leyton's sake, for the sake of all the children here, let's move closer to God.

Amen.

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