

Third Sunday in Lent

March 7, 2010

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XXVIII
THE COVENANT WORDS: VIII.
THE SACREDNESS OF PROPERTY
(Exodus 20:15)

I have for all of my life, or at least since high school years, suffered from bibliophilia. It is a strange disease that I have never really been able to shake, an ineradicable compulsion to collect books. . . . Actually that's putting it too strongly, or, rather, not quite accurately, because it is not an inward desire to buy books per se, to fill shelf after shelf, or to treasure the feel of a fine binding or admire the quality of paper and print—although I will confess a fondness for such things—but rather to search out the knowledge that is in them. It has to do at bottom with knowing what I do not know, and thus with wanting to turn every stone and search every corner, seeking to learn whatever I can from whomever I can, so my knowledge is as thorough, my understanding as complete, as I can make it. And so I seek to approach any particular subject or any particular text with a desire to know, insofar as possible, what every other writer of note has had to say about the matter. These are my dialogue partners. With some I will substantially agree, with others profoundly disagree, and some will set me off on my own line of thinking, but I learn from almost all. There are, however, rare exceptions. Seldom have I come up as empty-handed as I did this past week with regard to the eighth covenant word, “Thou shalt not steal.”

I found remarkably little of real substance or interest in any of the many books I consulted. The great Philo, the ancient Jewish philosopher, after expounding the previous commandment on adultery with passion and profound insight has to say on this one only basically that “he who keeps continually gaping after the property of others is the common enemy of the city.”¹ The contemporary Jewish scholar, Richard Elliott Friedman in his *Commentary on the Torah*, which is widely regarded as “the definitive Jewish Commentary on the Five Books of Moses”, simply skips over this commandment without comment, *as does* the generally admirable 24 volume series, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, that collects

¹ *The Decalogue* (XXVI.(135)).

the reflections on the entire Bible of all the ancient Church Fathers. The two best commentaries on the Book of Exodus are not much better. Rabbi Cassuto simply comments on the form of this and the two preceding commandments as succinct statements of “abstract and eternal principles,”² while the able Christian Old Testament scholar, Brevard Childs, who usually throws such rich historical and biblical-theological light on a text, here does little more than state that the particular nuance of the Hebrew word used here for ‘steal’ “distinguishes it from other types of misappropriation” by implying “the element of secrecy,” not exactly a revelation! Two composite books by Jewish and Christian scholars on the Ten Commandments themselves have generally been very helpful, but the essay on this commandment in one of these is devoted to John Calvin’s understanding of the “Stewardship of Love,”³ which understanding had a lot to do with the development of capitalism in the modern world, and the corresponding essay in the other focuses on Martin Luther King’s understanding of the “Beloved Community.”⁴ Both are fruitful studies but don’t help much with the fundamental understanding of the eighth commandment, “Thou shalt not steal.”

The scarcity of critical engagement with this commandment is probably due in part to its stark brevity and pointedness. This one like the two that precede it consists of only two words in Hebrew that don’t leave much room for misunderstanding. It may also be due in part to the fact that this commandment is so common, being included in the Code of Hammurabi and virtually every other ancient code of ethics. Besides that, it is just common sense, isn’t it? If stealing were not prohibited, no one would have anything. Everything would be in constant transit.

But if this commandment is both common and common sense, why would it be included in this select list of Ten Words spoken by almighty God from the darkness and fire of Mt. Sinai and accompanied with such a frightful display of thunder and lightning and the quaking of the mountain, and even more basically with this establishing of a marriage covenant between Yahweh and this people he has brought out of Egypt, whom he would make a holy nation and kingdom of priests to bear his truth to all the peoples of the world? This is, after all, the

² *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 246.

³ Allen Verhey, “Calvin and the ‘Stewardship of Love,’” in Roger E. Van Harn (ed.), *The Ten Commandments for Jews Christian, and Others*, pp. 157-174. Paul Lehmann similarly deals with Luther’s and Calvin’s understanding of property (*The Decalogue and a Human Future: The Meaning of the Commandments for Making and Keeping Human Life Human*, pp. 179-199).

⁴ Cheryl B. Anderson, “The Eighth Commandment: A Way to King’s ‘Beloved Community’” in William P. Brown (ed.), *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, pp. 276-289.

climactic revelation of God in the Old Testament, which is led up to by all that precedes it and which is foundational for all that follows.

Knowing this, we would expect it to be a commandment of wide application. We already see this in the further explication of the law. In the Holiness Code of the Book of Leviticus, where the commandments are repeated and elaborated upon, the commandment, “You shall not steal,” is preceded immediately by the words,

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourners. I am the Lord your God (Lev.19:9-10).

These last words are, of course, the very first words that God spoke from Mt. Sinai. And so it is as if God signed his name under the words just spoken about sharing, lending them the greatest authority: “I am the Lord your God.” With this solemn signature God warns us that the negative commandment not to steal from our neighbor includes by implication the positive requirement of caring for them, loving them, sharing with them, especially the poor and the needy. You may recall that this particular requirement about leaving the gleanings of the harvest for the poor and the sojourner played a key role in the story of Ruth, and thus in the very ancestry of our Lord. All that we have is ultimately from God whose love is universal, and we must share with others as he does with us.

The prophets, of course, rang the changes on this theme. What matter your fasts, your many prayers, your sacrifices and holy rites, if you do not care for the poor and the needy and the stranger within your gates, if you do not seek justice for all, if your ultimate concern extends no further than you and yours? With this commandment as with the others, it is not fulfilling the letter of the law, not simply abstaining from the filching what is not yours, but the positive action of love that is required.

But even the letter of the law is far reaching. In his *Large Catechism* Martin Luther said,

A person steals not only when he robs a man’s strong box or his pocket, but also when he takes advantage of his neighbor at the market, or in a grocery shop, butcher stall, wine and beer cellar, workshop, and, in short, wherever business is transacted and money is exchanged for goods or labor. . . . Daily the poor are

being defrauded. New burdens and high prices are imposed. Everyone misuses the market in his own willful, conceited, arrogant way as if it were his right and privilege to sell his goods as dearly as he pleases without a word of criticism.⁵

Those words were written almost 500 years ago! And Luther began his comments on this commandment by saying, “In a few words, this includes taking advantage of our neighbor in any sort of dealing that results in loss to him. Stealing is a widespread, common vice [he continues]. . . . If all who are thieves, though they are unwilling to admit it, were hanged on the gallows, the world would soon be empty, and there would be a shortage of both hangmen and gallows.”⁶

The commandment is indeed far reaching. That is why it is so brief and open ended. Jewish interpreters have rightly understood that it includes not only the theft of material things, but insubstantial things like intellectual property through plagiarism and the infringement of copyright laws, or a person’s time, which one can steal through the lack of punctuality. And I rob you if I do not do my due diligence in earnestly seeking to understand and expound to you the sacred Word of God. Stealing includes many things that can be done quite “secretly,” to use Brevard Childs’ word, like, especially at this time of year, slight, or not so slight, deceits in the filing of income tax returns. And thievery can also include the denial of a person’s most inalienable rights, as Martin Luther King noted in a sermon in which he said, “To paraphrase the words of Shakespeare’s Othello, [he] who steals my purse steals trash, ‘tis something, nothing, ‘twas mine, ‘tis his, has been the slave of thousands, but he who filches from me my freedom, robs me of that which enriches him not, but makes me poor indeed.”⁷ And this comment about the preciousness of freedom is especially relevant, given that the Israelites had been rescued from Egyptian bondage only seven weeks before the revelation on Mount Sinai.

Throughout this whole series of sermons, we have been trying to understand not only the ‘what’ of the commandments, but, even more basically, the ‘why.’ We must remember that the Decalogue is not only commandment but revelation, and not only “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not,” but, by implication, “Thou art.” It tells us who God is and who we are, who we were intended, were created, to be. Thus the two Tables of the Law are integrally related. We noted last week that “We are not to take the life of another [the sixth commandment] because God is

⁵ *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert H. Fisher (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 39 ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷ Cited by Cheryl B. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

the giver of life, [and] we are not to take the wife (or husband) of another [the seventh commandment] because marriage reflects God's gracious and loving covenant with his people." Now with the eighth commandment, the third of the Second Table of the Law, we can begin to detect a theme, as it were, the theme of the integrity of the lives we are to lead, an integrity that is related to the integrity of God himself. The commandment intends that we be content with what he have and can honestly earn, and not lust after the goods of another, as do also the two previous commandments in other spheres. Integrity requires owning the sufficiency of what God has given, whether it be much or little. There and only there is there fundamental contentment, wholeness. St. Paul said, "I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." Everything went haywire in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve wanted and took the one thing that God said they couldn't have. With the acquisition they lost contentment and peace and wholeness, and, most of all, sweet fellowship with God.

This inner integrity and completeness, this oneness in ourselves, corresponds with the oneness and completeness of God. The fundamental creed of ancient Israel was, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is *one* Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength" (Deut. 6:4). The Decalogue begins with the announcement, "I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me." The ancient world was full of gods; it was infused with multiplicity, and meant, therefore, a fundamental division in the heart and soul of man, and where there is such division there is immense disquiet. The God of the Old Testament is one, not only the only one, and not only one numerically, but perfect completeness, absolute unicity or inner oneness, an understanding that is only deepened and seen as more dynamic in the New Testament understanding of the Tri-Unity of God. We find our deepest peace and wholeness in reflecting in our lives that completeness of God, in loving him with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets, and all our happiness and well-being.

