

Pillars of Belief

TEXT: Deuteronomy 5:1-21

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on April 19, 2026

As we've been winding our way through the maze of what we believe, we've hit on several themes. The first has been to stop focusing on what we *don't* believe and put some positive content in its place. So instead of saying, "I don't believe in Jesus," say "I believe that Jesus is..." and then fill in the blanks with whatever you actually believe about him rather than what you're "supposed to" believe about him.

Again, the point of this series isn't to get anyone to parrot back what the church says, although you can certainly use that language if it fits what you personally believe. Rather, the purpose is to help you figure out what you actually believe, where that belief within you came from, why you believe whatever it is, etc.

When you know those things about yourself, then it's much less confusing to interact with other beliefs—be they the formal beliefs of the church, the beliefs of other religions, or the beliefs of other people in your life.

While keeping that in mind, we have looked at some specific beliefs of the church—the second coming of Jesus; the debate between faith and works; and beliefs about Jesus' resurrection—to see how core beliefs of Christianity can develop either toxic or helpful strains depending on the nuance or context presented with them and to what degree we're able to be humble in acknowledging the human limits of our knowledge about divine matters.

But it's often the case that the question, "What do I really believe?" can be too broad and overwhelming to consider without a concrete starting place. As a friend of mine likes to say, "It's hard to critique a blank piece of paper." So today I want to begin tossing in what I am calling "Pillars of Belief," biblical ideals and values that are more concrete and related to human interaction than to the nature of the spiritual realm, since most people, even outside of a religious context, have given some thought to at least some of them already.

As you may have guessed from Cathy's reading, the first of those pillars we'll look at is the Ten Commandments. They are listed twice in the Bible—the first listing is in Exodus 20 and the second is what you heard today from Deuteronomy 5, as Moses is looking back at the events of the Exodus. There are slight differences—brownie points if you compare them on your own and find them.

If the question, "What do you believe?" feels like staring into the void, the Ten Commandments can be a perfect starting point, both because it is such a specific list of things—most of which we've developed at least some thoughts about—and also because it's so universal. Of the list of commandments Moses brings down Mt. Sinai to the people, all but one of them has been found in the ancient law codes of surrounding civilizations.

Some believe that civilizations just copied each other's law codes. I find it more plausible that the overlap merely indicate the presence of something more universal within them. Problems with murder, theft, lying, adultery, violating kinship codes, etc. arise anytime you have more than about five people living together. The first murder in the Bible is just four chapters in. No civilization is going to look at the law code from another and say, "Oh, duh, we need to have a law about stealing stuff...why didn't we think of that?" Trust me. It will have already come up.

The only law unique to the Israelite code of the Ten Commandments is the commandment to "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." Exodus 31 tells us that the Sabbath commandment is actually the sign of the covenant between Moses and the Israelites, in the way that circumcision was the sign of the covenant between Abraham and his descendants. It could serve as the sign of the Mosaic covenant precisely because other nations and civilizations didn't have it; and total work stoppage one out of every six days would be something that was obvious to onlookers and kindred alike.

I hope to give that commandment its own week. But today I want to lift up the list as a whole, note how they function together, and lift them up as a relatively easy place to practice thinking about what you believe about specific things.

Known to the Jews as simply the “Ten Words” and to Christians as the “Ten Commandments,” the Exodus story is quite clear that these commandments from God were not imposed on the Israelites. They were offered as the condition of God’s continuing presence and protection and as the main way for the Israelites to witness to the world the nature and values of the God they worshipped.

The people could have rejected them if they wanted. As much as God wanted the beloved community that keeping the commandments would foster, true justice is a form of love; and you can’t force love. This is a voluntary code and to make it an instrument of coercion turns the code itself into an idol and violates the very law it seeks to uphold.

Notably for the American crusade to post the commandments in schools and other places, Moses was never told to put them on a wall or parade them around or otherwise display them. God told Moses to put them in a box called the Ark of the Covenant and to sit on that box whenever he served as a judge for the people. Notably again, that chair on the Ark containing the commandments was called the “Mercy Seat.”

The commandments were to be the literal foundation of justice for Israel. There *was* a commandment God wanted plastered everywhere, and we’ll talk about that in one of these remaining weeks; but it wasn’t these.

Often the Ten Commandments are examined individually, and there’s a place for that. But this morning I want to consider how they work together as a unit, leading the book of James to claim in chapter 2:10-11,

“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘You shall not murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.” The statement “I’ve kept all the commandments but one,” is—biblically speaking—nonsense. Break one and it all falls.

I think there’s an inherent order to the list, which makes the first few commands critical. They are the first line of defense. If those at the top are truly kept, everything else on the list is easily mastered. But those first few are also the most commonly misunderstood.

I’m going to try to avoid using numbers for them, since different traditions number them differently, but I think that whole first section is really all one thing. I would paraphrase its meaning this way: “I’m the God who just freed you from slavery. As I told Moses at the burning bush, I’m the only real God, so don’t get tricked into following fake gods made of wood or stone or some other sham construct. I’m the one who freed you, so if you want to stay free, keep me and the things I stand for as your top priority.

“If you want a different set of priorities than the ones I’m about to share, that’s up to you. But if you do choose another way, keep my name out of your mouth. Don’t call yourselves my people if you’re not going to live by my priorities. Don’t take my name in vain.” That’s what I think the opening words of God’s law means.

A critical error that those of us in the Global West make in reading the Bible as a whole is in thinking it’s targeted toward individuals. It is not—not in the Old Testament or in the New. These are Eastern writings and they contain the same focus on collective impact and goals that are still a subject of misunderstanding between Western and Eastern cultures today.

Individual behavior is critical, but the purpose of acting as individuals in the Bible is for the common good, not for individual benefit. And even those individual actions are only made possible by working with others and adding to the efforts of those who have come before us.

That general group orientation is true of the Ten Commandments as well. While it takes each of us as individuals to commit to keeping God's law; the goals are only attainable if we work on them together. We simply are not able to keep them by ourselves, as our societal systems are built for other ends and are more powerful than any individual effort.

The goal of the Ten Commandments is to have individuals making a covenant together to link arms and hold unjust systems accountable or to stop them from being created in the first place. They are the laws for a nation and its corporate structures—designed to promote not just individual morality but public virtue, which then ensures liberty and justice for all.

Individuals on their own are up against it. For example, our economic structures rely on us coveting what we see in advertisements, stealing the labor and dignity of the poor, the imprisoned, the aged, and the vulnerable, and making a day of rest impossible for millions. If we stopped buying things we don't need at Christmas, our entire economy would collapse. And that's just economics. The Ten Commandments represent God's path, not just to individual morality, but to a free and just society.

But putting that to one side, I want to return to a model of how I think the commandments work as a unit that I put together a few years ago. As we go through them, I invite you to think about your own views of what each commandment represents.

Imagine these commandments as a ladder. The top rung of our ladder is "No other gods before the one who just set us free and who is asking us to freely accept the laws of self-restraint that follow." Keeping that first rung intact means maintaining a continuous and conscious commitment to all that follows. We commit to making God's priorities our priorities.

If that top rung of commitment to God's priorities breaks, by definition we've adopted an idol; a false God, a top rung that is defined by something else. We have jettisoned the God who is and welcomed in something false. So, both of those rungs have to hold or break together. If we still insist that we're God's people when we don't really intend to live by those values, then we've taken God's name in vain and that next rung is also gone.

After sliding down that far, we would all be well-served to stop and rest, which is what the Sabbath commandment is about on its face. In a chaotic and broken world, keeping a steady eye on our moral core is challenging and exhausting. We will most certainly fail at living up to God's priorities if we don't stop to rest on a regular basis, and ensure that every living thing also gets that chance.

This can be more challenging than it seems. We are all in this together. If others are crashing through the lower rungs because our systems of labor won't allow others to rest, we won't stay on top for very long, even if we ourselves have all the time off in the world; because the ladder below us is no longer stable. All justice is social justice. If it's justice only for us, it's no longer justice, but privilege.

Without granting the needs of body and soul for rest, we won't have the energy for the hard work of honoring our parents and all those who had a hand in making us who we are as individuals, communities, and nations. Since these are laws adopted by adults, the command to honor parents is not about the obedience of children. It's about honoring and respecting the elders of a community. This is often the work of reconciliation and repentance, as well as guaranteed care for the aged, and if we don't have the energy for it because we don't regularly rest, or if social systems prevent stable living for our elders, a couple more rungs give way.

Now we're down to the rung that says we shouldn't take a life. If we haven't been able to reconcile with others, aren't rested, and have our priorities all skewed, this rung is now a lot weaker; and it is likely already gone if care for the elders has gone untended.

If we take a life, whether directly with a gun or indirectly through abuse, neglect, or indifference to the plight of those sick or otherwise living on the edge; it's easy to see how we will have little concern for being faithful to a spouse or respecting the personal or property boundaries of others.

Losing the rungs above us, we've already proven in myriad ways that we don't respect human life, so why would we respect their families, homes, or possessions? There go the rungs for adultery and stealing. Of course, by the time *those* rungs are gone, it's second nature to try to lie our way out of it, and end up at the bottom of a broken ladder coveting what everyone else has because we have lost it all.

But here's the gospel part. The good news for those of us who have fallen to the bottom—either individually or collectively—is that the ladder can be rebuilt in the other direction. Starting with the final commandment not to covet, we can use the list as a map to rebuild our lives and even our nation.

The virtue that keeps us from coveting is gratitude. Re-building that bottom rung means learning to be grateful for each moment and for whatever we have instead of coveting what we don't.

Practicing gratitude then becomes a foundational discipline that leads us to tell the truth about ourselves and others—to remember the truth about the goodness God placed at the core of all Creation, the right for everyone to live freely without abuse, and the obligation to share what we have with others.

It might take years to shed the practice of false witness that we proclaim so frequently about ourselves and others. But, if we could do that, we would start to recognize when we are taking something that doesn't really belong to us; when we rob someone not only of land and possessions but of dignity, meaningful work, civic participation, a sense of safety, or their full humanity.

When we've become aware of what was stolen, and are supported by the truth, we will naturally make amends for the theft and rebuild that rung as well. With that new clarity on basic boundaries, we can begin to apply that to the use of our bodies in our sexual expression and learn what it means to be faithful.

The support of all those lower rungs generates more respect for life in all its forms, which not only helps prevent us from wantonly killing but also brings the respect and feelings of empathy for others that we need in order to honor the elders who have spent a lifetime building the families, towns, cities, and other communities we now call home. Once we're honoring those who made our lives and thriving possible, we can more easily respect ourselves with a time of rest, giving us the energy to get our priorities in order and finally oust the idols that got us into our messes in the first place. We will be able to see them for what they are and toss them from their perch with relative ease.

With that accomplished, we are back at the top of a strong and sturdy ladder and can present ourselves with confidence to the world in God's name. We're also then back on the road to creating the beloved community where such a life brings healing to the nations and bears witness to the nature of the God we serve, without us having to say a word. But we will need every rung of our moral ladder to be as strong as possible to make it so.

As you are constructing your own beliefs, check in with each of those rungs and think about what you believe each of them means—not just as a matter for individuals, but corporately. What would it mean for a nation to honor its elders? How do corporations steal? Is it ever okay to take a life? Is it okay for the state to take a life? The word for “kill” in that commandment is broad. It's the same word used in other places in the Hebrew Bible for the death penalty, for killing in war, for self-defense, as well as for cold-blooded murder.

Pope Leo has been in the news this past week for giving Vice President JD Vance a better understanding of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Just War Theory, which condemns our attack on Iran for multiple reasons. Quakers are total pacifists—no war for any reason whatsoever. What do you believe?

The list is in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. What do you believe about these things? What is at the top of your ladder? What is your top priority in life; and is there a connection between that and the

commands that follow—or would your top priority lead to a different set of laws and principles? What do you believe? Amen.