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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

November 4, 2012

Acts 5:1-11; Philippians 4:10-14

Rightfully Ours

(Eighth in series, “The Ten Commandments: More Than They May Seem)

You shall not steal. (Exodus 20:15)

We arrive at another Commandment this morning that has what might be an obvious meaning but also a deeper and more subtle one. The Commandment is simply stated. *You shall not steal*. Perhaps we all know something of what that means. In the western world we might consider it to be an affirmation of property rights. We have things that we call ours: our clothing, our house, our car, our money. It is immoral for anyone else to help themselves to it. If someone does, it is a sin—a breaking of the eighth Commandment, as well as a breaking of our civil law. I think the eighth Commandment means at least that, but also more than that.

I consider myself to be a scrupulously honest person. I count my change at the store not only to ensure that I have received enough but also in case the store short-changed itself. I am proud to say that I learned this by example from my father. When I was a boy I remember him calling it to a store’s attention when he was once given back too much money. But what do you think? If my father had knowingly kept the incorrect change would he have been stealing? I think so. Is it not stealing to knowingly keep in any way something that is not rightfully ours? But what is rightfully ours? That may be a farther reaching question.

In a more communal society, the Commandment not to steal might in general carry less weight and be applied differently and perhaps less often. Where goods are *shared*, and *legally* appropriated by anyone at any time that has need of them, the idea of theft takes a different turn. Thievery might be defined more as unwillingness to share—the sin of stealing understood as the selfish keeping of things for oneself. Some Native American societies were communal types. A person of those cultures might consider something his or her own, at least for a while, but the idea was that at some time he or she would give it to someone else who needed it or maybe just liked it.

While directing a youth mission workcamp on a mid-western Native American Reservation, I had the opportunity to attend a Pow Wow. A Pow Wow is sort of like a tribal celebration and party. At the one that I attended, toward the beginning of the ceremony, for well over an hour, the only thing that happened was a giving of gifts. The person who was serving as the Master of Ceremonies was calling out names and giving out blankets to each person who came forward. I was told that many of the blankets being given had previously been given to someone else who after a while had given them back,

so that the same blankets could then be given to someone else. My understanding is that the giving of blankets at a Pow Wow is a surviving symbol and practice of the tradition of the communal possession of things. Re-gifting in some Native American traditions is an honorable thing.

It is my understanding that among native peoples of the Great Plains, the idea of a human being owning land was ridiculous. The first Americans seemed to confirm quite naturally, certainly better than the settlers of European descent, that what the Psalmist said is true. *The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. (Psalm 24:1)* Prior to settlement by people of European descent, there was little idea of claiming land as one's own or going to war in defense of one's land. You can not steal land from someone if they don't really own it in the first place, can you? Does everything need to belong to an individual or to a group? Can not some things belong to everyone?

For the first years of the first generation church the believers created a communal society. Everyone pooled their assets and belongings and then they were redistributed so that everyone had what they needed. This way of life did not last long for the church, but while it was still in effect, Ananias and his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property as was read in the scripture reading this morning from book of Acts. Now, Ananias and Sapphira were full members of that communal first Christian church where it was agreed by all the members that everyone would pool together all their assets. But when Ananias and Sapphira sold this property, they held back some of the proceeds for themselves. They cheated on the bargain to which they had agreed. They did not exactly take something that was not rightfully theirs, rather they held on to something that was not rightfully theirs, and they lost their lives for it. They broke the eighth Commandment, not by taking too much but by giving too little. They made a mistake in their perception of what was rightfully theirs.

Perhaps we can learn from the early church and Native American communal systems of living together, a more comprehensive understanding of the eighth Commandment.

We have in this country an income tax system which is called progressive. Those of higher income pay a higher portion of it in taxes than do those of lower income. I have heard some people criticize this system as an unjust redistribution of wealth. But I don't know. I read recently that fifty years ago the average corporate CEO made about twelve times as much as the average hourly laborer for the corporation. Now that CEO is likely to make two hundred times as much as the average hourly wage earner in that corporation. Now, really, does the executive work two hundred times harder than the laborer? Is the executive two hundred times smarter? Does the executive take two hundred times the risk? Don't you think the executive making twelve times as much as the laborer is enough of a difference? Do you think that all the money a CEO earns is rightfully his or hers when it is two hundred times more than the pay of the average employee? According to the laws of the United States it is rightfully his or hers but what about according to the laws of God? Is the law of the land the highest law that Christians have?

A few decades ago about twenty per cent of the nation's wealth was owned by the top two per cent of the population. Today that same top two per cent of the population owns about forty per cent of the nation's wealth. I believe in a progressive income tax. When people of means control so much of the nation's wealth the nation needs them to pay a higher percentage of their income in taxes than non-wealthy people do. I don't think that for two per cent of the population, forty per cent of the nation's wealth is properly theirs.

No wonder Jesus said it is harder for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. (Mark 10:25) The moral responsibilities of a wealthy person are so great!

Is all that we have rightfully ours? Have we stolen by holding something back which is legally ours but which according to the values of Christ we should have shared? Perhaps another way to look at the issue would be like this. It may all be rightfully ours, but rightfully ours to share.