



“The Song of the Souls Set Free”

Exodus 20:1-20

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October 5, 2008

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

All over the world this morning, women and men of God are standing in pulpits with a daunting assignment. Our task? Say something about the Ten Commandments.

Every three years, the Lectionary assigns Exodus 20 to be read and, perhaps, commented on. Many ministers flee to the Epistle or Gospel Lessons to avoid the assignment. After all, what can any of us say about a 3,000 year old moral code that hasn't already been said. Besides, all of you, at least I hope all of you, already believe the Ten Commandments and desire to obey them.

And, truth be told, there are more pressing concerns this Sunday. The world economy hangs in the balance. Why should we talk about something we already know and believe? Besides, obedience and accountability are not popular topics in our time.

My task is complicated by voices on the far right who proclaim that the Ten Commandments are the source of the American legal system and that they should be restored to the public square. I assume that means forced obedience of the Ten Commandments. Sincere though that commitment may be, it is hopelessly misguided and without legal, historical or theological support. (That is a subject for another day.)

Then there are voices on the far left that loudly scorn the idea of submission to any objective external authority. In our time, moral authority is shifting dramatically. We are told moral authority lies in each of us not in something outside of us.

All this, I suppose, is the reason for a strange silence in the church regarding the Ten Commandments. This silence is a new thing. In our own Reformed tradition, the Ten Commandments were for centuries part of Sunday worship. The Lord's Table was never celebrated without a solemn reading of the Ten Commandments followed by a time of confession and absolution.

For most of the history of the church, the curriculum for confirmation of adolescents centered on the Ten Commandments, The Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. Knowledge of and submission to all three were required for church membership and participation in Holy Communion.

The King's Chapel in downtown Boston has the unusual distinction of being the first Anglican Church in New England and the first Unitarian Church in America. All these years later, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer are printed on the wall behind the altar rail at the front of the church.

The Ten Commandments are an inescapable reality for people who take the Bible seriously. They will not go away.

So what can I say in the ten minutes I have left to make this ancient moral guide more real or relevant to us? What can I say that will make a difference in our lives together?

Better put, where do we start a conversation about the Ten Commandments? As you probably know from experience, any conversation is formed and shaped by the place it begins.

The place to start with the Ten Commandments is the narrative in which they are found. The Ten Commandments did not appear out of thin air nor drop out of the sky as some sort of abstract ideal. Instead, they are embedded in a story, and if we disengage the Ten Commandments from that story, we are likely to misunderstand them and, more importantly, miss their transforming power.

It's a familiar story. We heard a short version of it last Sunday. This story lies at the heart of the larger biblical story. You know the story. The people of Israel were in terrible bondage as slaves in Egypt. God liberated his people and set them on a journey to a new life in a new land.

That ancient story is retold, indeed reenacted, in every Jewish Passover celebration. The days of bitter servitude are remembered and God's deliverance celebrated in an elaborate ritual of remembrance. The ancient story is brought alive in the present. Jewish people know that the ancient story is their story too.

Whether we realize it or not, every Christian Communion service is another reenactment of God's deliverance of his people from bondage. Jesus established this meal at a Passover meal he transformed into a Eucharist. God continues to liberate people from bondage. This story is our story too.

The foundation stone of the biblical faith declares that our God is a liberating God. Liberation is who God is and what God does. God liberates because God is irrevocably committed to the world. God is bound by covenant oath to bless the entire earth. And God is bound to a particular people, Israel and the church, who are called to be the agents of that blessing. God is determined to bless us and through us to cover the entire world with divine blessing.

At the beginning of Israel's journey from slavery to the land of freedom, God gathered the people together to give them some rules for the road. Or better put, God tells the people, "Here is how to live together in my blessed and beloved community."

Notice carefully how the Ten Commandments begin in Exodus 20. God does not wag a finger at Israel and say, "Sit down and listen to me. Obey the following rules or else...." According to the story, the Ten Commandments are neither a threat nor merely a code of rules to follow. Something else entirely is going on in the story.

When I was a freshman in high school, the football coach invited all the freshmen boys to join the football team. He called a meeting in the gym and gave us the following invitation:

If you join my football team, you will not smoke or drink – during football season AND the rest of the year. If I even hear a rumor of it, you are off the team. You will get a crew cut or you will not be on the team. You will go to class and study hall. If you don't, you are off the team....

And so it went. It was not an invitation to freedom; it was a call to bondage. Not many accepted the invitation. I suppose that was his point.

God begins the Ten Commandments with a remarkable invitation. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

Did you hear it? Before the imperatives begin, a powerful indicative is stated. The kind of God we serve determines the way of life demanded. In fact, in the Jewish tradition, the statement, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...” is the first of the Ten Commandments. Our numbers 1 and 2 are combined and are Commandment number 2 in the synagogue.

The demand that follows is simple: now that I have set you free, you are free to love me in return. Stay free from the worship of any other god or thing. Don't let ambition, greed, money, pleasure or any other “stuff” bind you to itself. Then you are no longer free.

Now one way to do this, the Commandments continue, is to hear God's invitation to rest with God one day a week. “Disengage from the stuff that threatens to bind your soul and be with me,” God says. I'm not a workaholic; don't you become one, or you will miss out on what it means to be free and a real human being.

Do you hear it? The Ten Commandments are an invitation to be in a relationship with the God who liberates us from everything that binds us. These are not a list of rules and regulations. They are an invitation to love our maker.

There's one more thing involved in being free person, God continues. Stay free to love each other. Recognize that every human life is sacred. So don't hurt each other. Don't take each other's belongings. Respect each other, and honor each other's possessions, honor, and family. Tell the truth because lying is destructive. Be faithful to the sacred trust made in the covenant of marriage.

Being God's child is a radical way of thinking. It begins by recognizing the intrinsic worth of the God who exists to liberate us from everything that deforms us and our lives. This new way of thinking frees us for a life of worship and service on behalf of God.

Then the Commandments move to the intrinsic worth of the creation. Loving God frees us to love and serve what God loves and serves, namely the entire creation and every person in it. The God of the Ten Commandments liberates us to become what God intends us to be.

Several weeks ago, the *Wall Street Journal*, printed an edited version of the late David Foster Wallace's commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005. Versions of Wallace's talk have been circulating on the internet since his untimely death in August.

It is remarkable speech. He begins by stating that the issue in life is not “how to think” but “what to think about.” The problem with us, he says, is that it seems we are hard-wired to think mostly about ourselves. Our experience of life affirms our self-centered tendency. We see the world from our perspective. Our world circulates around us. We make judgments from our own point of view.

(I must add that Christianity calls that inevitable tendency “original sin.” We are all bent in on ourselves. We are essentially self-centered.)

Wallace goes on. Being a mature human is getting some control over our ravenous egos. We get to choose what we will worship – and Wallace firmly insists we will worship “something.”

And if we choose to worship anything but God (Wallace doesn't care what you call God), that choice will eat us alive. Money, power, beauty, intellect, all such gods are destructive powers. So, Wallace concludes, get out of your own head, choose to worship God, and treat people with the respect they deserve.

And I must add, not any God will do. The God revealed in the liberation of Israel and in the Ten Commandments is the God I choose, and I commend that God to you. The God

Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims
Sermon 10/5/08

of Israel declares, "I am the Lord your God who rescued you from yourself and every power that claims you."

That is the God revealed in Jesus Christ who came preaching, "The Lord God sent me to preach freedom to the captives, to set the prisoners free." The God revealed in Jesus declares loudly and for all to see, "I love you to death."

And so Jesus calls, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened down and I will give you rest....My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Why? Because Jesus invites us into a relationship of love with God and the world.

Instead of dreading the commandments of God we should be dancing the Decalogue. With the people of Israel beside the sea, God invites us to sing the song of the souls set free.

Amen.

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