

The Book of Order

Exodus 20:1-20

With all the other wonderful things we have going on this morning I don't have time for a clever opening illustration, so let me get right to the point: I think we should change the name of the Ten Commandments.

Here's why: it messes us up. It's misleading. It turns them into something they were never intended to be. Or maybe I should say it turns us into something we were never meant to be.

The child-rearing experts say that children want rules; they crave boundaries. It gives them a sense of stability and direction, a compass, moral and otherwise, so they know what is expected of them.

I would argue that adults crave rules, too. Case in point – after years of Presbyterians griping about all the rules and regulations in our Book of Order, it has finally been drastically cut, and now Presbyterians are in an uproar because no one is telling us what we have to do and how to do it. We like rules, but not for the same reason children do. We like them because they control other people, and keep them in line. We like them because, if you are a neurotic rule-follower like I am, they make us look good. We like them because they separate out the sheep from the goats, the good people from the bad, those who are in, from those who are out.

But here is the other thing that rules do: they create Pharisees. They create blind, unthinking rule-followers like me, people who want to be applauded for being good and keeping within the strict parameters of the rules, but don't really understand or even care about the intent behind the rules. They may not even realize there is an intent behind the rules. As we say, Pharisees follow the letter of the law, not the spirit of the law.

And that's not to say that God doesn't care if we obey these commandments 'religiously' or not. A few thousand years later Jesus would come along and tell people that they (we) weren't keeping them strictly enough, that when God said not to kill, God meant doing any harm to people – calling names, talking ugly about them behind their backs, even thinking unkind things about them. We were missing the entire point of the commandment if we thought that not shooting someone in a dark alley was all it took to get checked off on that one.

I don't think God's purpose here was to give his people a book of rules and regulations to live by, making 'good' people out of us. Once again, context will help us here. Remember where we started out, with one man, a two-person family, and a covenant, a promise that one day they would be a clan, a nation. They are almost there, aren't they? They've multiplied, they've been set free from Egypt. And now – boot camp. That's really what this is, isn't it? For the last few months out in the wilderness they've been broken down, stripped of their comforts, real or imagined, their dependences, their

illusions about themselves and who they are. They've learned that they can't find their way on their own,
they can't feed themselves,
they can't keep themselves hydrated and alive,
they don't have a clear sense of who they are or where they are going and what this whole journey is all about.

And, this whole monotheism business is pretty new to them. As far as they can tell, Moses is the one who is responsible for all this, good and bad.

So now that they are broken down, the process of building them back up begins. God is re-shaping them, rebuilding them. He is forming them into something completely new. And almost the very first thing he does is give them these ways to live. Not a list of rules to follow, but a book of order for their living together.

And, if they are paying attention, they will notice that it also tells them who they are; it gives them their identity: They are a community. A very distinct community. This isn't a list of things they cannot and should not do, it is a constitution. It forms the underlying principles that will characterize the people and the way they live together. They are bound to God, the one who gave them their freedom, and bound to each other. And they will live their lives in such a way that they won't do anything to jeopardize that; they won't do anything that will harm their relationships within that community. They won't put themselves and their own wants and desires and agendas above anyone else's. There is no pecking order in this community. There is no animosity or resentment or ill-intent. As Jesus would put it very simply a few thousand years later, they would love God, and they would love each, and every one of the other million or so people in the community, in very concrete, practical ways, in thought and in deed. They 'covenant' to live in that kind of community with each other.

I don't know why or how you all chose the name Covenant 45 years ago when this church was chartered, but it sure is a fitting name, and it's a name that should guide you every single day here. You are bound to each other, to love each other, to trust each other, to support and encourage and respect each other. I'm down to my last couple of weeks to say things to you, so I want you to remember that. You are a community, bound to each other, bound to love each other, in thought, and in deed, thick and thin, in good times, and in hard times. Sound like wedding vows, don't they? Maybe we should start reading the Ten Commandments at weddings instead of the more sentimental stuff, because living in community is hard work.

I used to be amused at the fight over displaying the Ten Commandments in courthouses and other public spaces, but maybe we should. Not so that everyone knows what the house rules are, but so that everyone remembers that God called us to be a people, a community, and that to live successfully in community takes quite a bit of effort on our part. Love is hard work. And, at least here in the church, it is work that we have taken on willingly, joyfully. You are a covenant community, shaped by the freedom that God has given you and the Ten Commandments. Never forget that.