

“First Thing’s First”
June 16, 2019
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Welcome to our Ten Commandment preaching series... which, will not only include preaching, but lots of music, too! I’m so looking forward to spending the next ten weeks together interpreting these Ten Commandments through music. Yay!

But first, why are we even doing this? What do the Ten Commandments have to teach us? Martin Luther, the father of Protestantism, believed that every Christian should know them, that every Christian should study them every day. Luther claimed that the person who knows the Ten Commandments knows the entirety of scripture; that, in the Ten Commandments, is contained all of God’s Holy Word.

...And I have to ask... “Really, Luther? That seems like a pretty big claim! And what about all that grace stuff? I thought you were into grace! And aren’t the Ten Commandments about the “law,” and not grace?” If you’re like me, you stumble over these Ten Words as an effective agent of God’s saving power.

Let's start here. The word "commands" or "commandments" can sound harsh, and demanding. But in Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, the word is "debar," or "debarim" – which means "word" or "words." So the "Ten Words" would be a great translation. The word "debar" can also be translated as "promise." In the psalms especially the word "debar" is used all the time, and it is usually translated as "promise" or even "gift." The Ten Words. The Ten Promises. The Ten Gifts. I like that!

Always a good practice, I would like to situate these Ten Words, or Ten Promises, or Ten Gifts, in their Biblical Context. What's going on when these words are heard by God's people? Well, in the reading we have today, from the book of Exodus, these words come right after God makes covenant with the people at Sinai. The people of God been wandering around and around – having first been enslaved for years and years over in Egypt – searching for that Promised Land, probably frustrated, tired, wondering where God is, when God suddenly declares, "You shall be for me priestly kingdom and holy nation." So, if the people of God are to be a holy nation or a priestly kingdom, *how* precisely are they do be these things? Well, it's by hearing, and heeding, those ten words. It's by not killing, honoring human life, respecting each other in relationships, and so on.

Another way to think about it: Why does God give the law at Sinai? It's all about love. And, what does love look like? How is love lived out? Same answer as above: love looks like not killing, honoring human life, and the rest. That is love lived out.

Exodus and Deuteronomy both contain the Ten Commandments,
Ten words written out of love.

Martin Luther said one time that to know the Ten Commandments
Is to know the entire Word from God above.

So, children, let's hear them now
And see what they reveal,
These words from God whose love is now made real.

*The Ten Commandments, from God to you and me.
The Ten Commandments, from God to set us free.
Years, they pass and Jesus our Lord says sometime later,
It's all about this love for God and neighbor.*

First thing's first: our God is first, there's nothing or no one before God.
The second one says, no idols that are grave.
Third, don't take God's name in vain,
And fourth, remember the Sabbath;
A day of rest, our dignity will save.
Five, honor Mom and Dad; and six, no more killing,
My heart is hurting when you are not willing.

Chorus

But wait, there's more! There's also number seven: no adultery.
This protects relationships so well.
Eight, you shall not steal; and nine, you shall not bear false witness.
That means that no lie is yours to tell.
Ten says don't be jealous, don't think others have it all.
When we covet others' stuff, we just feel small.

Chorus

And... these words are good news! What especially makes that possible is the prologue. "I am the Lord your God. I have brought you out of slavery. (By the way, this is the first word for Jewish folks. They count this as the First Commandment). This is good news, very good news, that God gives us!

We count our first commandment as "You shall have no other gods before me." To understand this, we need to remind ourselves what has come before? What has come before? Slavery! Bondage! If the God who is speaking here is the one who sets us free, who delivers from slavery, what would it mean to put something else in God's place? It would be something that puts us in bondage again. And so this first word tells us exactly who God is: God is the One who delivers from bondage.

What is the thing that holds us captive?
What is the thing that holds us captive?
What is the thing that holds us captive?
Come, Lord Jesus, now!

Greed is the thing that holds us captive...
Violence, it holds us captive...
Racism, it holds us captive...
Addictions, they hold us captive...
Our need to control, it holds us captive...
Keeping up with Jones' holds us captive...

Who is this God? This God is the One who delivers from bondage. And if we don't want the God who sets us free, then, what do we want? It would presumably be whatever re-enslaves us (greed, violence, all the stuff we just sang about). So by reaffirming that this first word is not simply God giving us a big fat "no!" from the sky, this first word is helping us ask the question: why *would* I want something else? Why would I want bondage? Why would I want slavery?

This first word asks, Who is God? The answer: God is the one who frees us. And, it asks, Who are *we*? The answer: We are the ones who get to live with liberation

at the center of our lives. We are the ones who get to live without any other forces holding us captive.

*I am your God, and I bring you out of slavery.
I am your God, and I bring you out. I set you free.*

Free from the things that would bind you
Free from those voices that find you
Doubting my love and my tenderness
Why do you cover your face now?
My love, you cannot erase now
Loosen your grip and just try to rest (in me)

Chorus

Come to the land that is living
Come to the mountain, I'm giving
You every path that leads back to me
Leave everything that is blocking
Tune voices out that are mocking
Remember my grace, it is always free (you'll see)...

Chorus

I know, your demons are screaming
But hear me, hear me: I've been dreaming
All the ways that you make my heart sing
I know that Egypt is calling
But with plagues and pests, it is crawling
And nothing there makes hallelujahs ring (you'll see...)

Thanks be to God!