

“Commandments”  
July 12, 2020  
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.

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Welcome back to our summer preaching series, “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith”! This summer, I’m preaching from a book that has influenced me so much over the last fifteen years or so – a book also entitled “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith” by Kathleen Norris.

In her book, Norris takes words like salvation, or incarnation, or commandments – words that many of us may have heard all our lives if we were church goers – and begins to imagine these words in fresh, new ways.

...And that’s we will be doing, too. Each week, I choose one of my favorite words from Norris’ book; each week, we explore together we might start to hear some of these words as if we, too, are hearing them for the first time.

Last week, we looked together at the word “doubt,” and challenged the notion that doubt is the opposite of faith. We concluded (along with a wise monk from Kathleen Norris’ book) that doubt is not the opposite of faith at all, but rather a part of it. And an important part at that. As the wise monk from Norris’ book put it, “doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, we spend some time with the word “commandments.”

Kathleen Norris begins her chapter on “commandments” by describing to her readers some of the tension her father lived in, growing up a preacher’s kid in South Dakota:

...while my grandfather Norris [her father’s father] had given up both alcohol and chewing tobacco when he became a Methodist [pastor], he still kept a box of cigars in the home. He didn’t dare smoke them... but he would chew on them while he worked on his sermons. Even this would have gotten him into trouble... So, for years, his wife and children were sworn to secrecy regarding his tobacco habit. My grandfather had been fired from one of his first churches, back in West Virginia, for playing hymns on the banjo...<sup>2</sup>

Though it’s true that banjo playing and tobacco don’t show up in the story we hear today from the book of Exodus (when the Ten Commandments are revealed to Moses and the people), we Christians have been known to interpret the commandments of God to cover just about anything we don’t approve of.

But if we take another look, we might start to see that these commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai are not meant as a prison, not meant as a set of admonitions to keep us from having any fun. Instead, they are an invitation to free us, to help us flourish, and to grow us more and more into the people God calls us to be.

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In our scripture passage for today, the Israelites have just been freed from slavery in Egypt. They are now wandering around the wilderness, with Moses as their guide.

Three months after crossing the Red Sea, Moses and the people arrive at a great, big mountain, called Mt. Sinai. God sends a thick cloud, wrapping the mountain in smoke. Only Moses is allowed to go up the mountain, and he stays up there for days.

When Moses finally comes down off the mountain, he is holding what we now call the “Ten Commandments” of God. And... ugg! They seem, at first, just like a bunch of rules, a bunch of prohibitions to keep us penned in and not having any fun...

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<sup>1</sup> Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 85-86.

But is that what is really going on? Why don't we look a little more closely? Instead of a bunch of rules, might we find freedom instead?

Let's begin with the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." These are great words, actually! These words free us from any sort of bondage to anything that is not the one true God. There are so many things that want to rule our lives: our fear, our egos, our reputations, our things. The first commandment invites us to give our allegiance to God alone, freeing us from the oppression of whatever might get in the way of that.

The second commandment is similar to the first: "You shall not make for yourself an idol." You know, we human beings have a terrible habit of making God in our own image, of believing that God is just like us, only bigger. But the second commandment frees us to reject this, and to reject all other idols – including our own selves projected into the sky. Instead, it insists on the one true God, the God who made us and who loves us, the God who gives us life.

The third commandment, "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God" frees us for right relationship with God. This commandment reminds us that we cannot manipulate God, that God cannot be reduced to our level. It makes clear that the name of God will not be dragged into our own agendas. It allows us to recognize that none of us has the Holy One on a leash, or in a box.

"Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." This commandment is good for us as individuals; and it is good for the whole world. Sabbath-rest is a kind of holy reminder that, because *God* is in charge, we don't need to run the show; so it's okay to take a break now and then. And, honoring the Sabbath is also a justice issue: it's a right extended to every single human being, not to mention the whole world! Sabbath-keeping, in other words, is an invitation for life for *all* of creation.

"Honor your father and your mother." This commandment reminds us that to be truly free, we need to be in right relationships across the generations. Of course, we have to keep in mind here that this commandment cuts both ways. It applies to our children as they relate to their parents, but *we parents* also have a role in taking care of our children, in treating them with the dignity they deserve as God's people.

"You shall not murder." Well, okay, this one seems pretty obvious. But I don't think this commandment is only talking about physical murder. There are other ways we murder each other: abusing those weaker than we are, telling someone they are not welcome because of the way they look or where they come from, our participation in white privilege and white supremacy. These are all ways to slowly kill the souls of sisters and brothers made in the very image of God. This commandment invites us to say "no" to these death-dealing ways of relating to one another.

"You shall not commit adultery." This commandment protects the bond between two people, and opens us up to relationships that are faithful. "You shall not steal" keeps us honest about what belongs to us and what belongs to someone else. "You

shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” points us towards truthful speech, and makes room for the possibility that I will not lie at your expense to make myself look better.

And finally, “You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.” The tenth commandment frees us from the attitude of always desiring more and more and more (greed, in other words), an attitude that leaves us unhappy, and makes it very hard – probably impossible – to love God and to love our neighbor.

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Unlike the story of Kathleen Norris’ family, these rules are not made up just to keep us from doing things others don’t approve of, like smokin’ or cussin’. These are more like Ten Invitations: a guide to a life that is full and free.

As Kathleen Norris writes, “Who, after all, would trust a God, a parent, a spouse, or lover, who said to us, ‘I really love you, but I don’t care at all what you do or who you become’?”<sup>3</sup>

God doesn’t hand us these commandments because God doesn’t want us to have any fun; these commandments are a gift for us, from God, given to us so that we might flourish, and find our way to a life that is full and free – the life of beloved children of God.

Thanks be to God!

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.