

“You Cannot Steal My Joy”
August 18, 2019
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Deuteronomy 5 (selected verses)

Moses convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently:

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. 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. Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. Neither shall you commit adultery. Neither shall you steal. Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor. Neither shall you covet your neighbor’s wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor’s house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Welcome to week eight of our Ten Commandment series, “The Music of the Ten Commandments.”

We often picture the Ten Commandments in two tablets. We are now squarely in the second tablet, or table, of commandments, which is all about care for the neighbor. Remember: it’s not just our relationship with God that matters; our relationship with one another, with our neighbor, matters too. It matters lot. God cares a lot about how we treat each other. We cannot have a right relationship with the divine if we don’t have one with our neighbor.

And remember last week talking about what “right relationship” requires, what it entails? Right relationship requires good, healthy, clear boundaries. God wants us to have boundaries, because God wants us to be free.

This is the great paradox: that the law actually frees us! That, in order to have true freedom, we need laws, or rules, or boundaries there, too.

Think about it this way: think about a fence surrounding a yard. If your kids go to play outside, think how much more relaxed, how much *freer*, you feel with that fence there. The fence, the boundary, keeps them safe. It keeps them protected. If there is no fence, there may be that *illusion* that there is more space or more freedom, but in reality, we are all less free without it. In this case, the parents are less free without a fence because they are constantly worried about their children’s safety; and the children are less free too (even though they may not feel it!) because they are in more danger without that fence around them to protect them and keep them close by their parents.

In order to have true freedom, we need laws, rules and boundaries.

And Church, God wants us to be free. In the case of “you shall not steal,” our commandment for today, God wants us to be free not to worry about someone taking what is our stuff. How free are you if you have to lock multiple locks on your door, get the alarms going, just to protect yourself? Not free at all. And if it does happen – if you have something stolen from you, even a small thing – it’s a terrible feeling. It’s a very un-free feeling. It’s a feeling of being violated.

When I was sixteen years old, I had just gotten my driver’s license, and I was all proud of myself because I was driving to the bowling alley all by myself (I was meeting my church youth group there). Well, I was running late, and I left my wallet on the seat as I ran inside. While I was inside, someone broke the window of my car, and stole my wallet.

And, St. Paul’s, it was awful! I didn’t even lose anything worth anything – I had less than ten dollars in cash, and even though I had to go to the DMV again to get a new license, all in all, I lost nothing. But still. I felt so used. Abused. Violated. That’s the word that kept coming to me. Violated. The opposite of feeling free.

But so was the one who stole my wallet. That person was not free either. .

Like with so many of the commandments, when one person’s freedom is violated, so is the other one person’s. Because remember, these boundaries are put in place so that we, *and* our neighbor, can be free. And when they are violated, both parties feel it.

Don’t take my stuff, please!

It’s very clear: this stuff is mine
And when you steal, it’s not “just fine.”
It may be small, that which you take
But both our freedom’s here at stake.

It’s not that I don’t want to share
I’ll make it plain. Let’s clear the air:
See, when you take, I feel abused
You’ve crossed a boundary, and I feel used

See, God wants us to be free
And when you take this from me
I’m not the only one who’s been wronged by you
You’ve got to live with it, too

Sometimes, there’s a subtler form of stealing. Have you ever heard someone say something like, “You stole my joy”? Or “you took my happiness/well-being/sanity/peace/etc.?” That’s a bad feeling, too. One of my favorite country/blues singers, Lucinda Williams, sings a great song about that:

Joy (Lucinda Williams)

I don't want you anymore Cause you took my joy...
You took my joy I want it back...

I'm gonna go to west Memphis and look for my joy...
Maybe in west Memphis I'll find my joy...

I'm gonna go to Slidell and look for my joy...
Maybe in Slidell I'll find my joy...

You got no right to take my joy, I want it back..
You took my joy I want it back...

But church, here's the thing about that subtler stuff. It's true that you can literally have your wallet, or your car, or your clothes, or your jewelry, stolen from you. And that is not right. But Lucida, as much as I love her, is wrong. There are some things no one can take away from you. (Actually, I think she very much gets it. That's why she writes this song about searching everywhere for her joy; she knows, on some level, that she'll never be able to find it because it hasn't in all truth been taken from her in the first place!)

There are some things that no one can take away from you, that no one can steal from you. There are some things that you have a choice about. No matter how someone hard someone tries, they cannot take your joy from you. No one can take your well-being, your happiness, your sanity. Sure, sometimes it may *feel* like someone takes those things from us, but the truth is that we *give* those things away (and good news: we can also take them back whenever we want!). Ultimately, through the grace of God, we are the keeper of those things, and if we decide to not give them away, then no one can take them from us!

There are some things that are mine that you cannot take away
There are some things that are mine all my life long
There are some things that are mine that you cannot take away:
My joy, my peace, my strength, my happiness, my song

All these things, they come from God above
And that means they are deep and real
And you can't take them away; no, you cannot take this love
These are gifts from God, you can never steal

Oh, you may have come to hurt me, and you may have made me sad
And you may have broken my poor heart in two
Even still, I'm whole and good, even though I may feel bad
And I am full with singing now: this is my truth

Remember how God calls us to love God, neighbor *and* self? I wonder if not allowing someone to steal these things from us – the things that really matter like joy or peace – I wonder if that is a form of loving ourselves. I wonder if it's a form of trusting ourselves, trusting that, by the grace of God, there are some things that are ours that the world can never take from us.

What good news!
Thanks be to God!