

“Boundaries for Life and Community”

Exodus 20: 1-17

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A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

A story which I hope will put a smile on your face: Once a minister was in a hurry to get to a meeting in the congested downtown area of a large city. He was unable to find a parking space so he decided to park his car in a no parking zone, taking his chances that he would not get a ticket. He quickly put a note under the windshield wiper which read, “I have circled this block 100 times. If I don’t park here, I will miss my appointment. He added a verse from the Bible – Forgive us our trespasses.

When the minister returned to his car some time later, he found a citation from a police officer along with this note: “I’ve circled this block for 10 years. If I don’t give you a ticket, I will lose my job.” And the police officer added a verse from the Bible of his own – Lead us not into temptation.

A few years ago, I was traveling during the middle of the week in the early afternoon on I 40 headed east. It was a gorgeous fall day, there was virtually no traffic, so I turned on the radio to my favorite music station and was paying little attention to the speed limit or my cruising speed. Out of nowhere, flashing blue lights showed up in my rearview mirror. Yep, I got a speeding ticket. When I got home, I called my law enforcement officer son to complain about the mean police officer who was just looking to give someone a ticket. My son asked me calmly, “Mom, what was the posted speed limit?” After admitting that maybe I was going a tad

bit over the speed limit, my son replied, “Mom, the posted speed limited is not a suggestion – it is the law.”

This morning’s scripture reading from the book of Exodus opens with the Israelites camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, in the middle of the wilderness in which they find themselves after escaping the oppressive slavery of Egypt. The Israelites actually wander through the wilderness for forty years, during which God reveals himself to them as a loving, gracious and present God who will provide for the Israelite’s needs, sustaining them. God is shaping a people who will become a faith community and through whom God will reveal himself to the world. But this community must live within certain boundaries. Reminiscent of the establishing of boundaries in the Garden of Eden, God invites Moses to join him on top of Mt. Sinai to receive a list – 10 to be precise – of do’s and don’ts which will define the nature of this community of faith which God is creating. They are commandments, not suggestions. God is, in effect, clarifying God’s expectations for our relationship with God and with other people. The establishing of these commandments is to protect the health of the community. Most of the commandments are a negative formulation because of this primary concern to protect the community from behaviors that have the potential for destroying the community. So, as I read these commandments this morning, let’s keep in mind that the commandments are given by God for the sake of the **Common Good of the Community**. Much of what I will share with you this morning comes from Terence Fretheim’s Commentary on Exodus from the Interpretation Series, published by our Presbyterian USA John Knox Press.

Prayer for Understanding

Read Exodus 20: 1-17, one commandment at a time.

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.” Obedience to God’s commandments is a matter of a relationship to God – not god-in-general, not adherence to the law for its own sake – I am the Lord *your* God. The Israelites have already been chosen by God for relationship and salvation. The Law is not understood as a means to salvation but as instruction about what it means to be God’s people in the world. We cannot pick and choose which laws suit our individual purposes but they all, all 10, shape our life together as community.

“You shall have no other gods before me and you shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on 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 the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.” Why were idols forbidden? Idols are representations of a god used as an *object* of worship. God is not an object, but a subject in this relationship. Objects are the things we worship which we create. To name a few – we worship money or the things money can buy, we worship youth and our appearances, we worship our dogmas and perhaps even the groups to which we belong. Anything or anyone which we put as central in our lives instead of the Lord our God, is an idol.

“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.” This commandment is designed to protect the divine name from being used in any way that brings God or God’s purposes for the world into disrepute. False swearing or profanity would fall into this category. In our culture today we toss around God’s name frivolously or selfishly. “The name of God is so commonly associated with empty phrases or easy religion or the latest ideology of a social or political sort. The name of the Lord gets dragged down to the level of the contexts in which it is used.” (Fretheim, page 228) We use God’s name to justify our own agendas or beliefs.

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” This is the longest of the 10 commandments. God is specific about keeping the sabbath. And this commandment seems to be a hinge. The first 3 commandments are about our relationship with God and the following 6 commandments are about our relationship with other people. Sabbath keeping puts all human striving aside, recognizes the decisive role of God in creation, and provides a weekly oasis to rest. On the sabbath, and remember God also rested on the seventh day after creating the world, we learn the lesson that we are more than what we produce or accomplish. Sabbath rest is the great equalizer – it is for rich and poor, master and servant (biblical terms), human beings and animals. We all need sabbath time to rest and reflect about our relationship with God and other people. I have had church folks tell me that they can worship God on the golf course, but my response is, yes, but do you?

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving to you.” Mother and father, together, are equally to be honored. The meaning of the word “to honor” means that no one specific behavior is commanded. It is an

open-ended commandment meaning we are to treat our parents with respect, esteem, having concern for, showing affection and appreciation. Showing obedience is not at the center of what it means to honor.

The next commandments are phrased in the negative. I once had a seminary professor who suggested that we might put these commandments in the positive.

“You shall not murder.” Or you shall respect God’s gift of life. To destroy life is to “act in God’s stead. Life is not for human beings to do with as they will; they are not God.”

(Fretheim, page 233) All life belongs to God because God is the giver of life.

“You shall not commit adultery.” Adultery is a crime against persons. It violates God’s creational intention. It treats the other persons involved as objects rather than as subjects. Sexual harassment, rape, and pornography are also violence against the personhood of another. Respect, honor and integrity should inform our attitude and behavior toward members of the opposite sex. Here’s a good measure of whether what we are doing is disrespectful to another person – if you feel you must keep your behavior a secret, you are probably doing something you know is wrong.

“You shall not steal.” Israel understood that property was an extension of self. Theft of property is a violation of person; it is an attack on the dignity of human beings and their work. In our contemporary society, with our addiction to possess more and more, we have to ask the question, “at whose expense is extravagance gained? Are not inadequate or unequal wages and benefits a form of theft?”

“You shall not bear false witness.” Lying is a violation of this commandment.

Deception, slander, idle gossip, empty talk which will undermine another person’s reputation is destructive and a violation of this commandment. This commandment calls everyone to use speech constructively, to so speak of others that their well-being is furthered and enhanced. Oh my! Our political atmosphere would sure be different if we adhered to this commandment!

“You shall not covet. Your neighbor’s house, wife (or husband), or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” This is the only commandment which deals mostly with matters of the heart and not actual behavior. Covetousness is an eager or excessive desire, especially for wealth and possessions which belong to someone else. It encourages us to compare what we have to the lives of other people and it breeds discontent. It is the basic source of social disorder and trouble in interpersonal relationships. It betrays a deep dissatisfaction with that which one has been given. It is at the heart of that saying, “grass is always greener on the other side.”

There we have it. The boundaries for our life together as a community. They are not mere suggestions, but a way in which God orders creation so that we do not spiral into chaos and destruction of the community God desires for us all. We can try to spin these commandments all we want; we can pick and choose which ones we believe are irrelevant or relevant. Jesus will come along centuries later and he will interpret these commandments for his own time – simplify them so that we cannot add our own spin. When the Pharisees quizzed Jesus about which of the Jewish laws were most important (the Pharisees had added over 600 spin offs of these 10 by the first century), Jesus replied that they could be summed up into three commandments. Love God with your whole heart, soul and mind” – reflecting the first 3

of the 10 Commandments. “Love your neighbor” – reflecting the last 6 of the 10 Commandments. And “love yourself” – reflecting the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment for sabbath rest for our wellbeing. And these three must be held in balance – you cannot love God as God intends without loving yourself and your neighbor. You cannot love yourself if you cannot love God. You get the picture. These commandments are the gift of God for the people of God, so that we might live in community as God intends.