

Exodus 20: 1-17  
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Before we read today's passage, I'd like you to take out those blank sheets of paper from your bulletin. Now, without looking at your neighbor's work - this is not a team effort, not at least at this point - all on your own, see how many of the ten commandments you can write. And for those who need an extra challenge, see if you can get them in the right order.

[time to write]

In Jewish tradition, the Torah has been understood not so much as the giving of the law, but rather as the giving of direction or teaching. These ten teachings did come to us with a swirl of drama. Moses stands on a mountain top before God, and God issues these teachings for the Israelites. Moses descends with the ten written upon stone tablets.

It's all set up for 20th Century Films to create an epic cinematic piece.

But behind all the drama is a relationship. And even more to the point, undergirding all of these teachings is a covenant with the people.

If God did not care about humanity, what difference would it make how we lived or treated one another? If God did not care about us, wasn't fully invested in our well-being, would it make any difference whether we "wandered into the ways of death"<sup>1</sup> or danced in life?

But God does care. God set this covenant up generations earlier with Abraham and Sarah, and it matters to God how humanity goes forward with one another. The nature of relationship - God to human - that matters too. And thus we have the 10 Commandments.

So now, it's time to tabulate our results. Hear now the reading of the Ten Teachings from Exodus 20.

How did you do? Anyone get all ten in order?

How about all ten? Nine? Eight?

Well, for those of you who are a lot more like me, and can rattle off six easily and then stumble around on the rest. And certainly can't quite get them in order, we can all breathe a great sigh of relief. God did not make these commandments as some sort of academic achievement test. My salvation (or salary!) will not be dependent upon how this congregation does in answering.

But then again, how we live these teachings. Well, I guess that *does* say something about the nature of this community - both in our relationships with one another and our journey toward God.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, page 77.*

So I'll invite you now to take another look at the list of ten. And consider honestly where you are with them. And I'll just state my intention right out front: I hope you find yourself falling short - in each section.

What? you say. You're accusing me of murder? Well no, not directly. But the truth is that we live in a nation that still upholds the death penalty as a just response to conviction. Wouldn't you agree that as long as we reap the benefits of such a justice system, we are also culpable of the choices it determines on behalf of others?

Or stealing. I think that as long as we perpetuate war in the middle east, based on economic greed for stable oil supplies, then we are all guilty of stealing. Perhaps we don't ever get caught with our hand in the candy jar. But every time we fill our gas tanks, we have to wonder at who's expense we are transporting ourselves.

Being the good Presbyterian that I am, underneath all of this Methodist cloaking, I can assure you that each of us is guilty of sinning before each of these teachings. And by sinning, what I mean is the Greek understanding of the word hamartia - to miss the mark. Each of us has individually and corporately missed the mark when it comes to these ten teachings.

So take a moment now to ponder your relationship with the ten. Perhaps you want to make a note or two by them. But really take a moment to come to terms with how it is you meet and miss the mark on God's Ten Teachings.

When you feel so led, I invite you to bring the stone you have forward and place it on the table - and as you do so, you can offer a prayer of repentance or a word or two of recognition of how these teachings guide and fail to guide you in your daily walk. It is a moment to lay before God both physically and spiritually your struggles.

[allow time for reflection]

Friends, we engage these commandments personally like this, because this is how God presented them. Yes, they were to an entire community. But in this text, the teachings are framed by God's reminder, "I am Yhwh who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." It is with those words that God introduces the whole piece on the teachings. And Jews see this as the first commandment - the first teaching.

The you in this sentence is singular. Up until now, God has spoken to the Israelites as a collective. But, this is the moment chosen to speak to each individual.

Speak to each individual's *personal* experience with the divine's salvation. Each person there knew first-hand, a lived experience of walking through the dry land of the sea into freedom.

Each person remembered the warning to not let the bread rise and to paint the blood of the lamb over the doorpost.

Each person here, each of us, has a first-hand, personal experience of God in our lives. Even for the most bookish in our lot, who like to live in our heads, even for those of us who might not at first feel like we fit into this description of folk, even we have an experience of the Divine in our lives.

And these Ten Teachings are framed by that personal experience, that relationship with God.

And God says in response to that experience, “You think *that* was good. You liked that experience with me, well try going deeper. Here, take these and walk with me into a whole new way of living. A way of living where your life is richer for the ways in which you can look your neighbor in the eye in love. A way of living where your life is more meaningful because of how you can see beyond human reality and glimpse eternal presence.”

“I love you, and I delivered you,” says God. “So take this gift of my teachings and let them help you fully live.”

God claims relationship with each of us. And I believe we each claim that relationship with God. That relationship is what prompts God to offer these teachings as gift.

May we accept them as such. May we be guided, cajoled, even humbled into a fuller and more honest expression of those teachings in our lives.

Amen.