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Moses & His People & Their God VII. Wonderful Words

(Exodus 20:1-17 NRSV) Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me. 4 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. 5 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, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7 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. 8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 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. 11 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. 12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. 13 You shall not murder. 14 You shall not commit adultery. 15 You shall not steal. 16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17 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.

Let me let you in on a preacher's little secret: This is one of those scriptures that most preachers both love **and** hate to preach on. Why? Well, like the scriptural stories at, say, Christmas or Easter, most preachers love to proclaim the great and abiding and central stories of our faith – those that tell of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But, most preachers, in my experience, also approach those times and those texts with at least *some* apprehension because there is always that question: *“What in the world can I possibly say about these scriptures that hasn't been said a thousand times already?”* The very same sort of mixed feeling – both anticipation and anxiety – attends the preaching of this passage from the book of Exodus. On the one hand, I love looking at this scripture that contains the Ten Commandments, for God's giving them is really the true beginning of the Hebrew people's identity as God's own people; this story

marks the true beginning of the Jewish faith – and as Christians who have been, as one scholar has put it, grafted on to the history of the Jewish people by God’s graciousness this scripture is central too to our faith.

But, at the same time, there is also some anxiety about preaching on this scripture. For besides the question of *“how can I possibly have anything new to say about such a familiar story?”* there are additional elements that freight this passage in our particular day and time. Whatever your politics, you know that the Ten Commandments have often been a field of battle about whether they can or should be displayed in public or governmental places, and such cases have regularly ended up at the Supreme Court. Although Justice Anton Scalia has pointed out that it is ironic that 90% of Americans believe in the Ten Commandments but 85% probably couldn’t tell you what the ten are.¹ Moreover, whatever your theology and your politics, it’s very hard to get past that image that is burned in our minds of the movie, *The Ten Commandments*, where Cecille B. DeMille shows the very finger of God as if it were a cosmic power etcher writing on those stone tablets.

So what do we say about the Ten Commandments? How can these familiar words be made relevant and fresh? A preacher friend of mine decided that the way to approach the Ten Commandments was to first give the Children’s Sermon and to ask them a simple question which might also get the adults to look at this topic with fresh eyes. This is what he said: *“Today we are talking about rules that help us out. Do you have rules you have to follow in your household?”* Whereupon one precocious toddler raised his hand and the pastor put the microphone in front of him and the toddler loudly said *“One rule in our house is that you don’t pee on the floor!”* I’m not sure that congregation has stopped laughing yet, and those are the moments that they don’t teach you about in your preaching class in seminary! But my friend’s intent, whatever

¹Anton Scalia, quoted in www.nph.com/nphweb/html/pmol/pastissues/Lent%202006/webmar19.htm

the unexpected answer he got, is indeed the right one: how **do** we make these commandments relevant today? How **do** we hear them and remove them from their too-often ideological and politicized context? And, perhaps most importantly, how **do** we square these laws, these commandments, with our understanding of a God of unbounded grace? Well, let me offer the following thoughts about the Ten Commandments, knowing that each one of them could be the subject for a sermon in itself.

The first thing for us to know is that the original name for these verses is not the Ten Commandments, but the Ten **Words**. That's what the Hebrew people came to call these verses in the 600 years between the time that the commandments were given to the people and the time they were first written down. The Ten Words. That sounds so different, doesn't it? But it fits, it fits. Why? Well, I want you to think about a teacher in your life, maybe it was last year, and maybe it was 80 years ago – a teacher whom you still remember as having had a significant influence somehow on your life. Just as Laura Hatler so beautifully gave her testimony last Sunday to the power of a Sunday School teacher, I am willing to wager that most of you also have in your memories such a teacher and that teacher was not someone who was stern and scolding and unapproachable, but someone who somehow offered you a life-giving **word** when that was what you needed. Maybe it was a word of hope when life seemed dreary and drab; maybe it was a word of comfort when you were hurting; maybe it was a word of encouragement when you were dispirited; maybe it was a word that helped make sense of life when it was confusing and scary. Was there one of those teachers for you? I know that there has been for me.

And here is the thing: the Ten Commandments, what the Hebrews wisely called the Ten Words, are meant to do exactly the same thing; they are not meant to make

our lives miserable, they are not the sign of a scold-y and bad-tempered God, but are the signs of a God who would also give us the Word we need of hope, encouragement, wisdom. In this regard, Professor Thomas Long's thoughts are compelling; listen to what he says:

In the popular religious consciousness, the Ten Commandments have somehow become burdens, weights and heavy obligations. For many, the commandments are encumbrances placed on [our] behavior. Most people [believe] that each one is a finger-wagging "thou shalt not." ...heavy yokes to be ... placed on [our] necks....²

But that's not how God meant them.

No, these Commandments, these Ten Words, are meant not to simply constrain us but to free us. To put the point in a seemingly paradoxical way: These limits on our freedom are meant to free us. And yet it's not really paradoxical, for when you think about it absolute freedom from all restraint, all rules, all structures, would not be exhilarating but would be absolutely terrifying, wouldn't it? It would be unimaginable to try to create in every moment our own rules for every situation. The temptation would surely be to only seek our own good, to watch out for number one, to put me and mine ahead of everything else. But, such a life can hardly be described as free – for you would always be having to watch your back, always be wondering if you had created the right rule, always be wondering if others were going to get you before you had a chance to get them. That's not freedom, that's terror.

Let me explore this point from a different direction: There is a *sense* in which I am absolutely "free" to walk over to the piano, sit down, and begin playing. However, since I have never studied the piano, never practiced, never attempted even the most

²Thomas G. Long, "Dancing the Decalogue," www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3333

rudimentary of rules concerning how music gets made on the piano, my so-called “freedom” to play the piano is a pretty empty thing – IF the goal is to make something pleasing to the ear. Because without some rules to give structure and form to my freedom to plunk on those keys, it is just not possible to make something beautiful, only something that is ugly. One of our children once went through a troubled phase when he was very small in which he was prone to throwing some pretty awful temper tantrums at the slightest provocation. Now, notice something: in once sense he was “free” to do so. And yet it was very clear that that freedom scared him, and that even in the midst of those tantrums he *craved* some structure, some order, some limitations on that freedom, even. Barbara wisely knew this, and when I was sometimes at my wit’s end with him when he did one of these tantrums, she would sometimes simply hug him tight in her arms and whisper to him “It’s okay. We are not going to let you hurt yourself or anyone else.” She knew that while he was indeed free to embarrass, shame, and scare himself with those outbursts, such freedom in no way made for a good life. No, in those moments, he **needed** loving structure, loving constraint, even, so that he could live better than he would simply left to his own devices. All by itself, his freedom was simply the tyranny of a troubled psyche.

The laws embodied in the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments, function in the same way: they give us rules in which our freedom can find its greatest expression – like a piano that is beautifully played because it is played with both freedom and yet rules – and they give us that sense we are held tight in God’s arms and that God does not want us to hurt or shame or embarrass ourselves or those with whom we our lives.

I like the way that one writer puts all of this: The Hebrew people have, he says,

...been set free from the slavery of Egypt.... But now comes the really hard part: once you’ve been set free, how do you stay free? How do you live a life that is truly free? Someone who has been set free can become enslaved again.

Someone who has been saved can be lost again.... There is power in these ten words, but not the power we might think. Their power is not to create freedom, but to sustain it.... But freedom never comes as an established, full-grown oak. Freedom always comes as a fragile sapling. For freedom to survive, it must be nurtured, tended, cultivated. These ten words are the tools God gives us to cultivate the freedom He has given us.³

That's a powerful analogy. I once had occasion to help plant a long row of tiny saplings along a fence-line. Now, there is a sense in which once stuck in the ground, those trees were "free" to grow. But simply being stuck in the ground wasn't enough to ensure that they thrived. And so fertilizer was put in those holes, sheets of plastic were put down around them, they were carefully watered and re-fertilized and tended. One could say that all of these things were burdens and barriers, constraints on the trees' freedom. But that would be wrong – it was those very things that allowed the trees to survive and thrive.

Again, it is the same with the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments. You can take virtually any one of them and see how these apparent constraints on freedom actually make for a life that is more free! In fact, their apparent constraint on our freedoms actually make us more free to have better, more beautiful, more honorable lives. With that in mind, the writer I quoted earlier paraphrases several of the commandments as if it were God speaking:

Honor your parents.... Nothing takes quite as long to mend as a fractured family. Don't take what's not yours. And this includes all kinds of things. Don't take someone else's life. But neither should you take what is equally precious to them: the love and relationship with their spouse. Don't take someone else's possessions away with your hands. But neither should you take their reputation

³<http://www.nph.com/nphweb/html/pmol/pastissues/Lent%202006/webmar19.htm>

away with your words.... You may think it is okay to wrap your heart and eyes around something, as long as your hands don't take them. You may think that, but it's wrong. Keep both your hands and your heart off of things that belong to your neighbor.⁴

There is a hymn that some of you probably know, "Wonderful Words of Life." Its opening stanza goes like this: "Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life. Let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life." The Ten Words, the Ten Commandments are words of life. Without such teachings, it would be very, very difficult, maybe even impossible, to live well or beautifully. Without such teachings, such words of life, we will face the terror of thinking ourselves absolutely free. Without such teachings, such words, life will be far less lovely than it could have been. God **gives** us our freedom; these Ten Teachings, Ten Words, Ten Commandments and others like them, allow us to **keep** that freedom. What words, indeed, could therefore be more wonderful?

⁴ www.nph.com/nphweb/html/pmol/pastissues/Lent%202006/webmar19.htm