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Words to the Wise: A Sermon Series on the Ten Commandments
VI. 6, 7 and 8: The Ties that Bind and Bless -
An All Saints Sunday Meditation

Exodus 20:13 14 No murder; no adultery. The Message
Exodus 20:15 Do not steal. Common English Bible

I'm not going to tell you which Elder has already asked me why Marcia gets such an easy scripture to read, totaling seven simple words when this other Elder seems to always get, he or she says, long scriptures with proper names that are designed to tie the tongue when read publicly. Well, mea culpa and I hereby promise that Elder that will try next time to pick a scripture for them that is short and easy – or maybe not. ☺ But let's look for a second at the what, in fact, the brevity, the terseness, the compactness of today's scripture might actually be telling us. For several weeks, now, we've been studying the Ten Commandments, those "words to the wise" that were first given to the Hebrew people following their flight from their enslavement in Egypt. We have seen how over the centuries Egypt went from being a place of protection and sanctuary for the people to a place of slavery and oppression. We have seen how they were so in danger of forgetting who they were and who God was that they had to be "re-introduced" to the God of Abraham and Sarah. We have seen, as with any people, when anxiety and fear got the better of them on their scary journey that they were tempted to forget what had actually been their situation, to put on rose colored glasses, and long for what was – which, of course, had never really been. And each of the commandments thus far, numbers one through five, has been meaty enough, full enough, to deserve its own day, its own sermon. But now, particularly as seen in our translations for the day, with commandments six, seven, and eight we have a great deal conveyed in only seven words and the preacher has decided that all three of these

commandments ought to be looked at together.

But there is another reason for doing so that has to do not just with their brevity. On first blush, these strike me as rather minimal rules of behavior for a community. Folks can stay inside of these norms and still be perfectly nasty people. They are easy to “legalistically” obey. They remind me of how, when our children were little, we used to tell our younger son at church fellowship dinners that he had to get a least one green thing on his plate. And he would invariably find the green jello - or sometimes to his delight, the cookie with green icing. When I was in college and shared a house with four other guys, we agreed that we would each do 20% of the cleaning of the common areas – kitchen, bathrooms, living room – but let me tell you, the combination of college students, rental house, and a legalistic interpretation of what the minimum the “law” required made for a residence that would never appear in House Beautiful. Part of me wants to say to God: Couldn’t you do better than that? I mean, not murdering folks, not taking what isn’t yours – these seem like pretty low standards for a community, a people, that had begun with such high hopes when that covenant was made with Abraham and Sarah and this people was to be a light and an example to all the nations. These minimal-seeming standards may be the ties, in the words of today’s sermon’s title, that “bind” us together but on first blush they may not seem like terribly much of a blessing.

And yet, as my wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, reminded me when we were talking about these commandments and this sermon, my reaction that these are pretty minimal standards of behavior is in fact a luxury, and that actually, if folks in any community, in this or any society, truly lived up to these commandments it would indeed be a blessing. And she’s right. For in the last month we have seen five more precious schoolchildren die from the barrel of a gun, a gun which, by the way, has far fewer safety regulations than the playground equipment at those schools; in the last month

three sheriff's deputies were shot and two killed with an AR-15 assault rifle, a rifle that Presidents Reagan and Ford pleaded with Congress to ban as has every major law enforcement agency in the country¹; in the last year almost one and a half billion tons of food has been wasted and discarded, reminding us of the truth of Pope Francis' remark that "Throwing away food is like stealing from the table of those who are poor and hungry."² No, you see, far from being just minimalist, legalistic standards of behavior, these commandments if they were in fact consistently observed would indeed not just be a way of binding together society in a way that doesn't too often kill and starve people, but would in fact be a blessing indeed.

And yet, on this All Saints Sunday, I am reminded that part of what we do is remember and honor and give thanks for those who did indeed not only obey these precepts but in fact when far beyond them, often in quiet ways. I am reminded that the Savior whom we claim, a devout Jew Himself, indeed affirmed the goodness of these precepts but also said "I have come that you might have life and have it **abundantly**." For while it would indeed be a wondrous and worthy thing if you and I and our world more consistently managed to live up to these "minimal" rules, I am also this day thinking of those unsung folks who not only kept these commandments but who went beyond them and demonstrated what truly blessed, truly abundant life could look like. Let me tell you one of their stories.

A woman by the name of Namie Kobayashi was a member of my church in Hawaii. Her name will never be famous, but she truly lived an abundant and blessed life. At the age of 96, Namie died and I was privileged to do her funeral. Eighty years earlier she had been one of the "picture brides" that were so common in Hawaii for a generation or two. It worked like this: all over Hawaii, Japanese and Chinese men had

¹http://articles.latimes.com/1994-05-05/news/mn-54185_1_assault-weapons-ban/2

²<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/05/us-pope-food-idUSBRE9540OZ20130605>

been brought in to work the sugar plantations. They thought that they would save enough money to return home someday. But working for a \$1 a day, living in the flimsy huts the plantation owners erected, in hock to the company store, that day mostly never came. And so marriage brokers saw an opportunity. They went through the camps with their old-style cameras and their notebooks and signed men up who wanted a bride. In good capitalist fashion, they allowed the men to pay on credit - further digging them into the hole that would keep them tied to the plantations. The brokers then went back to Japan and China and circulated through the poorest villages where parents who couldn't feed the children they had would look over the marriage brokers' notebooks and pictures, and select a man to be wed to one of their daughters. The marriage broker then gathered up all these teenage girls, took them to a port city, and off they went to Hawaii where the broker and his marriage cargo would stop at each port. And that was what happened with Namie. She found herself on the docks in Hilo meeting en masse, along with all the other girls, the husbands that had been selected for them. A mass wedding was conducted on that dock, by both Christian and Buddhist priests, and only then did these impossibly young girls meet their new husbands, who took them by horseback up the coast to whichever camp was to be their new home. Can you even begin to imagine?

But Namie was one of the lucky ones. Too many picture brides found themselves wed to men who were alcoholics, who beat them mercilessly, who gambled away the meager wages they made forcing their household to often go hungry. For although she never again saw her parents or siblings, her husband was a good man, a hard worker, and one who wanted to better himself and who treated Namie well. But what a hard life it was. Up every morning at 4 a.m. to prepare both breakfasts and lunches for the boys and men in the family who were expected to be in the cane fields by 6:00 a.m. To do so, she had to carry two big buckets down the slippery sides of the

gulch that ran through the camp to get water, then chop wood, get a fire going, get husband and older boys ready for their days while tending, in her earliest years in Hawaii, the babies that came. Now, Namie could have railed at the unfairness of her life, but she never did. She could have been one of those who took that minimalist view of life and decided that if she didn't murder or steal or commit adultery that was enough. But Namie reached for the abundant life that Christ promised, even in such a challenging and hard time and place; she went beyond the minimums as it were and with God's help achieved a life of bounty, beauty, and blessedness. She discovered she had a talent for cooking and among the camps of the Hamakua coast of the Big Island it was not unusual for dishes to be served that came from Namie's recipes. She discovered she had a gift for teaching and although she never went past sixth grade she came later in life to be an equal partner with her husband in organizing the labor unions that finally helped curb the worst of the plantation system's sometimes cruel excesses. She discovered, she who had come to her husband's house and bed as but a child herself, that she had a fierce and tenacious love of children and she became known as one who would protect any child who had been battered by those who were supposed to have loved them the most. She loved to sing and she joined her voice joyfully in the church's choir, and she became a trusted teacher and leader in the church's women's fellowship. And when she departed this earth, she left a legacy up and down the Hamakua Coast, she had proudly helped raise three sons who became pillars themselves in their communities, she was remembered by too many girls as a source of safety when their lives had become hell at home, she was honored as one who in her own right had helped her people, modern day sharecroppers, find the justice and fairness that the plantation system had kept from them.

Namie's story is just one of countless stories that could be told of men and women who indeed obeyed – thanks be to God – those precepts found in the sixth,

seventh, and eighth commandments and if that was all that they had done it would have made the world a better place. But Namie and countless others did more than just this oh-so-necessary but oh-so-minimalist requirement. Some of those countless others are listed in our bulletin this morning, and each of us recalls ways that these ones, too, both obeyed and but went far beyond as they lived lives of bounty, as they became blessings to others in so many ways.

In a moment we shall come around the Lord's Table as we share communion together. Now, we often think of the celebration of communion as one of the things that links us with Christ's whole body of believers across the world. And it is indeed the sign that God's love through Christ is larger than anything that tries to divide the church, it is the reminder that God feeds everyone who calls upon the name of Christ even when we might find ourselves in profound disagreement with them. It is the sign and reminder to us that God's house and God's table is always, always wider, God's hospitality more encompassing, than we can know. It is the offer not just be fed and fueled in a minimalist sense, but the opportunity to know a tangible sign of that life abundant that Jesus calls us to and challenges us to. But particularly on this All Saints Sunday we should also be reminded that this Table where we are fed, and all Christ's children are fed, links us not only with the living in every land, but the dead as well. Have you heard the phrase "the communion of the saints"? At this Table we are offered the opportunity to experience that phrase: the saints of God – that is, those who lived their lives knowing God's care and seeking to do God's will, those who were able to achieve what the commandments asked of them and those who were able to achieve and be so much more – crowd with us around this Table. Do you see them? Do you see them? Do you see them?