

## “Law or Love?”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver  
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon  
4 October 2020*

### Exodus 20:1-20

Then God spoke all these words:

<sup>2</sup>I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

<sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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.

<sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup>You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup>You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup>You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup>You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup>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.

<sup>18</sup>When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, <sup>19</sup>and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.”

<sup>20</sup>Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.”

Ronald Reagan once said, “I have wondered at times what the Ten Commandments would have looked like if Moses had run them through the US Congress.” Well, some four decades of Congressional deadlock and dysfunction later, I guess we know the answer: the Decalogue would still be bottled up in committee.

Humor, whether or not it is politically inspired, has long looked to the Commandments as source material. We're all familiar with the trope of Moses, the tablets, and a spot on a mountainside, as the setting for a one-panel cartoon.

Another gag for you, courtesy Dave Allen, the late Irish comedian: Moses came down from Sinai and announced he had good news and bad news—the good news was that he had talked God down from fifteen to ten commandments. The bad news: adultery was still on the list.

Okay, my sermon isn't just going to be sharing old gags with you, but I would like to make this point: both President Reagan's and Mr. Allen's audiences would get the joke because they knew the reference. Even in our secularized, diffuse, atomized society, most everyone knows what the Ten Commandments are.

We can imagine the two stone tablets, and if we have seen Cecil B. DeMille's classic movie, we can see them being engraved by the Almighty himself as Moses stands by, watching in awe.

But do we really know what they say and why they are so important?

The first twenty chapters of Exodus can be boiled down to this brief synopsis:

The Hebrews were enslaved. Pharaoh was mean. Moses was called by God to set him straight. Pharaoh told Moses to take a hike. God inflicted plagues on Egypt. Pharaoh relented. The Hebrews escaped through the Red Sea to freedom in the desert. And then the Hebrews were faced with the existential question: what next?

That's where the Ten Commandments came into play. Everyone likes to talk about the newly liberated Children of Israel. But what did it mean for them to be *free*?

Frankly, they didn't have the slightest clue. The only talent they seemed to have was one for complaining: Why didn't you let us stay by the fleshpots of Egypt? Why don't we have any water to drink?

After all those years of servitude, they didn't have any sense of how to organize themselves as a free community. So, to get them started, God spoke the words we know as the Decalogue to the gathered people at Horeb. And when he was done, they were terrified.

Which actually made a lot of sense. Meeting God directly should fill us with awe, with fear, with a sense of something greater than ourselves. Here, the Israelites were told by God how he wished for them to comport themselves.

It's been observed that our generation hears these words and doesn't take them to be commandments but *suggestions*. We take or leave them, based on our preference. Which means that Mr. Allen's quip kind of falls short, doesn't it? God may have told us to reject adultery, but since we follow our own standards, that prohibition is optional.

But how about we see the Decalogue as something else, as signposts, as markers showing us the way forward. Rather than leave us to our own devices, which would lead to us getting lost amid a sea of moral chaos, God has shown what is necessary for us to begin to build a community, something that is at the heart of the human experience and is essential to the Biblical story.

When we read the Ten Commandments, we remember that they are not to be isolated but seen in context. They are part of the Exodus story, in which a people are led into freedom to live in relationship with God and with each other. The Israelites were not freed from bondage to live in wild abandon. Remember, starting with Abraham and Sarah, their forebears lived in covenant with God, and their descendants were meant to also. And over the years they lived with one another in that most basic community, the family unit, even when times were tough. But by the time of the Exodus, Scripture tells us the people had grown so numerous that a new organizing principle was necessary, and the Ten Commandments were the beginning of that process.

We see this unfold in the complex of laws that begins with the Decalogue of Exodus 20:2-17, continues in the Covenant Code of chapters 20:22-22:23, expands in the Priestly Code that starts in Exodus 25, continues in Leviticus, and then runs through Numbers 10 and occasionally the rest of that book. Then, for good measure, it is restated in Deuteronomy. This body of legislation (for lack of a better term) was written down over centuries, with different redactors shaping, editing, and interpreting them.

The Ten Commandments were intended not to be a penal code with which God could smack down the Children of Israel, but to be the living law that would help people live with one another as God wished them to.

When we look closely at the laws, we see that they are rooted in God's love and also in God's wisdom. We live in world of abundance, but God is focused on our learning to know when we have enough. Remember the story of the manna? Everybody had just the right amount. Here that principle is restated. If we wish to be fulfilled, we will know what it means to be satisfied.

Think of that First Commandment: *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.* That's it: one God. You don't need any more to be satisfied.

And then, to drive the point home, the second tell us, *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; 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation*

*of those who love me and keep my commandments.* Don't waste your time on idols, the people are told. We know, of course, that they didn't listen. While Moses was receiving the law, the people had Aaron melt down all the treasure they had taken from Egypt, that late payment for four centuries of slave labor, and then fashion for them a golden calf. They could have been satisfied with worshiping the one true God. Instead, they prayed to a cow made of metal. What fools!

But before we get too full of ourselves, we should recognize that we, too, are tempted to worship idols. We need to heed this message ourselves. Our wanting and buying and getting a bigger house, a speedier car, a sleeker computer, whatever, is a form of idolatry. We need to recognize when enough is enough; otherwise, we will never be satisfied and, rather than concentrate on the good in our lives, we will chase after false dreams that can never be fulfilled, losing sight of what is good and holy in the process.

The list goes on, but I'll focus on just a couple of the remaining commandments:

*There's the sabbath: Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 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. 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.*

We need this commandment more than ever! Talk about not being satisfied with what we have! In this time of Covid, with people working from home, it is that much harder for many to separate work from rest. Instead, we work and work, but do we ever stop to ask whether we will finish in seven days what we did not in six? Most likely, no. We will need to continue whatever it is we are doing the following week. So, why not take a break, rest up, refresh, reenergize, reconnect with our loved ones, and then return to our work invigorated?

As we think of taking sabbath ourselves, we are reminded that as we live in community, we should strive to make sure everyone has a break, a chance to rest. Some companies may think 24/7 is good for the bottom line, but is it really good for us?

Then there's the issue of killing. In the NRSV this is translated as "You shall not murder." But the Hebrew root *רצח* (*raysh-tzadi-hay*) can also be translated as "slay," which leads us very quickly to "kill." Despite the clever efforts of some commentators, this isn't a sly attempt to carve out a license for the state to engage in judicial killing. The bottom line is that God has given us life, and we are to treasure it, not find new ways to end it. We need to come to terms with what we do, the violence we commit, and not make excuses for it.

Covenant. Community. What do these words call to mind for you? A straight jacket? Or maybe something far more positive? Perhaps even love?

Each month when we celebrate communion, I say in the call to the table that “if your heart is willing to venture ordinary love with average people, you are welcome.”

Think about that. We are a people who are rooted in the Ten Commandments, called to walk, serve, laugh, and cry together.

When we think of law, including God’s law, as a series of dead letters, as niggling regulations meant to tie us down, we will chafe and seek to make exceptions. We do this every day, to be honest.

None of us are committing homicide, but how many of us blithely speed on Route 89, making excuses that we’re better than average drivers (do the math, half of us are not); that this law was meant to have wiggle room; that what we have to do or where we need to be is *important!*; that our violation doesn’t harm anyone else? That’s all well and fine, but what happens when we hit a stray car part on the highway, and our vehicle spins out of control, and we strike another driver, and emergency services have to be called in? Then things seem different, don’t they?

Liberty isn’t license, and freedom is not anarchy. The community which God calls us into is one of solidarity, of caring for one another, of giving of ourselves so that others may live more fully.

Preachers for whom I have immense respect, people like Sam Lloyd and Sam Wells, have insisted, and rightly so, that the Ten Commandments weren’t just for a band of ex-slaves moving into a new faraway land more than 3,000 years ago. They are meant for us and these times, especially if we take seriously the word of Jesus.

Over the years, I have found myself returning to the words of Matthew 5:17-20: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus spoke these words just after he delivered the beatitudes, which, to him, were a fulfillment of the Law. We, as the gathered church, are called by Christ into a fuller, richer, more meaningful life—one of covenant, community, and, dare I say, love.

Set aside visions of hippies and VW buses, of sassy teenagers and the Sixties. That’s not what I mean. For us to be a community of love is to be a community in God. In all we do, in all we profess, we should hear echoes of the words of John, that God is love. Nothing else and nothing more. God is love.

We need to be reminded of this truth every day, in every place.

Look at our world today, where so much of our common life is shaped by suspicion and not solidarity, selfishness and not sharing, lies and not love. We are all too inclined these days to point the finger in accusation instead of reaching out our hands in reconciliation.

Love is a tricky thing. We often define it narrowly, as sex or romance, but in truth it can be hard work. My mother once observed that just because you love someone, you don't have to like them. Harsh words in some ways, but sometimes all too true, especially if we are to maintain our family ties. These words show us a way of getting along. We can disagree with one another, but do we have to demolish each other? Sure, it would be nice if we all liked one another, but different interests, perspectives, and beliefs can prevent that from happening. Sometimes, we are like oil and water. We can acknowledge this truth and let ourselves be consumed by profitless hate or resolve to at least love one another. After all, God finds a way to love you. And God also finds a way to love me.

That in the end is not a joke or a punchline but a precious truth, the truth that is at the foundation of what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community, one that we might recognize is shaped by the Ten Commandments, given by God to all his people, with the hope that they might live with him and with one another, in peace, in grace, and in love.