

## The Rules

Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC

May 8, 2022

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

### SCRIPTURE READING

Exodus 20:1-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

**1** 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.

## Sermon

I don't know if you realize this about me, but I am someone who knows right from wrong. My instinct, in any quandary, is to define what is proper and improper, what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. I am very clear on the rules. I can tell you in any circumstance what you *should* do. This is perhaps a good characteristic in a moral leader - but it's a bad personality trait for a pastor. *See - there I go again. This is good - that is bad.*

You might not know this about me because part of my training as a pastor - and part of my ongoing work - is to quiet that voice inside that says - Right! Wrong! Definite! And to try to move toward listening and collaboration. I don't always do that well, and if you have caught me on a tired or tender day you have heard more judgment than you should have.

Folks who have seen me at my most instinctive or sometimes at my least thoughtful (sorry John) know that I love knowing what is right and knowing what the rules are, and telling you.

According to one personality typing I am a Reformer driven "to do the right thing and make the world a better place for everyone."<sup>1</sup>

Something like the 10 Commandments is my jam. Ten clearly spelled out ways to live the way God wants us to live is balm for the Reformer's spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Which is why something that I encounter multiple times every week makes me absolutely bananas. On my regular driving commute there is an exact spot where the speed limit sign says 30 in one direction and 35 in the other direction. What's worse, there is another exact spot where the speed limit in one direction is 25 and 30 in the other direction. Who here passes by those road signs? Do they make you as angry as they make me? Are you as ready as I am to call the (three) towns responsible for this ridiculousness? What should I do? There's no right answer! It makes no sense, it is contradictory, it is just wrong, and I am indignant about it. Though, for whatever it's worth, I follow the number on whichever side of the road I'm on.

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<sup>1</sup> Enneagram - see <https://www.backstorypreaching.com/blog/enneagram-and-preaching-gifts-and-shadows>

<sup>2</sup> Well, not so clearly spelled out....I'll get there.

But, we're not here to talk about street signs, I suppose. We're here to reflect on the Lord's Prayer - and today, on the words, 'hallowed be thy name.'

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer, several Biblical scholars opine that he was taking people back to the Ten Commandments and interpreting them in the context of a prayer practice.<sup>3</sup> The first part of the Lord's Prayer talks about how we should worship God - just as the first several commandments talk about worshiping God. A lot of the second half prays about how we live in community - similar to the second half of the commandments. So, let's look at those commandments again.

They come in the context of Exodus - liberation from slavery.

For 40 years, the people walked. Along the way they stopped at Mt. Sinai. They had been in Egypt for hundreds of years, slaves for hundreds of years. God's people in the wilderness did not know how to be the people of God. They were liberated, set free, sent forth to look for a promised land but they did not know how to be the people of God.

God knew how to love the people with Her whole heart....later she would give her only son. But the people did not know how to love God. So God made a promise to them: "5 Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6 but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:5-6)

God spoke ten words. That's what the Hebrew says, it does not say ten commandments, it says ten words.

Ten words on love. Ten words of covenant. Ten words to set the character and the boundaries of a liberated people who were only then learning how to be free. These were ten words to outline a new kind of community, an alternative to empire. Because you see, they were establishing a new nation distinct from the way things were in Egypt.

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.

That is to say - I love you, I liberated you. Do not be taken in by earthly rulers, do not return to Pharaoh's oppression. And do not set yourselves as gods over others.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol...and you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God."

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Nijay K. Gupta, *The Lord's Prayer: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*. 2017.

That is to say - You will be tempted to worship the land, you will be tempted to worship power, you will be tempted to worship gold and you will even be tempted by a golden calf. But God says: *I am your God. The God of freedom, justice, love. I am committed to you. Worship me, not worldly things. Pray to me, not to a flag. Remember who you are: my beloved children.*

Later in the ten words, God says, now, if you can't figure out how to love me, just look at the people around you. I created them in my image. When you love them, you love me. Create loving families. Do not harm each other because if you murder, you are destroying my image. Be just in your dealings with each other.

Jesus came along and in his commandments, he said:

Love God. Love your neighbor. And he was quoting, Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19... his two greatest commandments come right from those forty years in the wilderness. The Hebrew people were taught ten words that each trace back to, Love God, love your neighbor. And as they walked on toward the promised land, yes they sure did get a lot more concrete instructions - but over and over again, they heard: these are the most important things, as you establish a nation that is an alternative to empire. Love God. Love your neighbor.

In the desert, God said: Live differently from slavery to Pharaoh in the empire of Egypt.

In Jerusalem, Jesus said: Love differently from servitude to Caesar, in the empire of Rome.

So Jesus taught a prayer practice that drew upon ancient tradition, and taught his followers to love God most of all, and love everyone and everything God created.

And these commandments, these words, these teachings, matter to us today. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says, "We (also) are the ones who have been offered liberation from the empire."<sup>4</sup>

We do not worship the 10 Commandments themselves. We do not worship the Bible. We worship God, and we use the 10 Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Greatest Commandments, the Psalms and the parables, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, to understand how best to worship God, to love God, to hallow God's name, to do God's will on earth as it is done in heaven. Christians learn, through the teachings of Jesus, that to by loving our neighbors and creation, we are worshiping our common Creator

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<sup>4</sup> "The Commandments and Liberated, Liberating Bonding"

I've spent a lot of time this week contemplating right and wrong. I have absolutely and definitely stood in judgment of people who stand in judgment of others. In a search for holiness, it is simple to turn to the rules.

But as Rev. Katey Zeh puts it: "I often think of how Jesus responded when he was challenged on an issue of law. Instead of abstract debates, Jesus focused on the person in front of him in need of healing. When Jesus saw a man with a withered hand, Jesus healed him regardless of the laws of Sabbath. When a hemorrhaging woman touched his garment for healing, Jesus praised her faith regardless of the purity laws and codes she had broken. Jesus centered the one in need."<sup>5</sup>

How do we follow Jesus? We pray as he taught, we center the needs of the ones on the margins, we work for liberation, and we start with compassion.

So, there is right and there is wrong.

There are rules.

And there is tenderness and compassion.

There are rules and then there are stories.

There are rules that help communities develop identity and shared language.

There are rules and the rules always have a context.

There are rules, and there is grace.

There are rules as humans understand them, and then there is the only rule, which is love, and while God has many more names than we could ever count, God is love.

Part of what it means to call God's name holy is to lift up the name of God which is love. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://youngclergywomen.org/how-to-talk-about-abortion-in-church/>