

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Deuteronomy 5:1-21

A businessman notorious for his ruthlessness, announced to Mark Twain, "Before I die, I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud at the top." "I have a better idea," said Twain. "You could stay home in Boston and keep them."¹

You read the Ten Commandments. If you've read along in the Read-Through, you've read the Ten Commandments twice, both in Exodus and Deuteronomy. You heard them read aloud this morning and some of you might know the gist of them by heart, maybe memorizing them in Sunday School many years ago. But as Mark Twain reminds us, it's one thing to read them and a whole other thing to keep them.

In some ways, this is part of the shame in the way we've been talking about the Ten Commandments the last several years. We've preoccupied ourselves with conversations over where to display the Ten Commandments rather than committing ourselves to the far harder task of following them. Because, I must say, we aren't as good at these as we think we are, and I'm talking about Christians.

John Walton is our Old Testament Scholar in the video series our Sunday School classes are using. One of the first things he points out to us about the Ten Commandments is that in the translation, we should be thinking of them not so much as commandments but as words or ideas or principles. When we think about commandments, we associate those with blunt statements like our parents made to us when we were kids—"Don't touch that." "No dessert until after dinner." "Be home by 10." But Walton suggests these are less about blunt statements of command and more about life altering principles or words or philosophies. The Ten Words are different from the way every other culture in the world at the time was living. These ideas were meant for the people of Israel to demonstrate another way of doing life altogether. If truly followed today, these words would guide us in a whole new way.

We can see why the Ten Words were needed for the Israelite people. Before their enslavement in Egypt, the forefathers didn't appear to have guiding principles other than to listen to the Lord and obey. But when coming out of Egypt, we had hundreds of thousands of former slaves who had been living not with God telling them what to do but with the Egyptian taskmasters taking charge over their lives. Now with a newfound freedom, does anything go?

Imagine teenagers going off to college for the first time from a place where others decided the rules to a place where young college students must set their own boundaries. Or imagine Rumspringa, the Amish ritual of passage where adolescents can sample the world. Rumspringa is translated "jumping/hopping around." They're permitted to do this before choosing baptism. Too often we think in this false binary of our adolescents. The alternative to having rules or commandments is having complete freedom. And complete freedom can be lawlessness and chaos. Well, it doesn't work that way and God knows that.

While the people were leaving a land of oppression, injustice, and harshness in Egypt, they were suddenly free. But freedom wasn't reckless abandon for the people of God. Their new freedom was moderated by the ones they chose to be in relationship with. If in their freedom, they chose to be in relationship with God, the one who had just let them out of Egypt, then there were principles by which they would live. And if they didn't live by them, then they were not really in relationship with God.

¹Clifton Fadiman, ed., *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), 483.

Our freedoms are moderated all the time by the people we choose to be in relationship with. I am free but because I want to be in a relationship with my wife whom I love, I am going to cook dinner if I'm the first one home. I am free but because I am in a relationship with you all at this church that I love, I am going to come pray with you when you are sick. The 10 Commandments are similarly principles that moderate our freedoms because of the ones we choose to be in a relationship with. I am free but because I want to be in relationship with the God I love, then I am not going to give lordship to anyone else or anything else in my life. I am free but because I love my neighbors and want to be in a relationship with them, I am not going to take what is theirs.

Do you get it? The people entered into freedom only to start a new relationship in love with their God and their brothers and sisters, so God gave them these principles and boundaries in order to show their love better. Our freedom is limited, but God's is not.

So, if we look at the structure of the 10 Words, the first four Words have to do with moderating our freedoms because of our relationship with God. Because we love God we will have no other gods, we won't make idols, we won't use God's name flippantly, and we will observe the Sabbath day.

The next six Words are freedoms moderated by our love for each other. Because we love each other, we'll honor our parents, we won't kill, we won't commit adultery, we won't steal, we won't lie to each other, and we won't covet each other's things because we love God and because we love each other. You know what's missing in all of these love commandments though... Because we love ourselves. None of these commandments do we follow because we love ourselves. Now someone might argue that we do all of them because we love ourselves and we know that God can punish us and bless us. But I don't think God wants us to moderate our freedoms based on a selfish intent. Now that is the way the world works. The world sets up rules and laws all the time based on what I am going to get out of it. These negotiations happen all the time on capitol hill—I'll vote for your bill if you vote for mine. I'll vote for this if you give some pork to my people. I'll help you get elected if you help my business. These are the governing systems of the world, and they are selfishly moderated. But this is not so in the Kingdom of God. For in the Kingdom of God, we are learning about selflessness. In the kingdom of God, we get down on our knees and wash someone's feet as a gesture of hospitality, not because that is in any way good for us, but because it shows the other how much we love them.

The 10 Commandments are radical in that way. They're not about me and my glory and my self-love.

Author and Pastor Lillian Daniels has done some work studying the "Spiritual but not Religious" people of our culture. You've probably heard of and know a few people that fit the category. These are people that say they are spiritual but don't want anything to do with organized religion, the Church. They don't believe they need church. They can figure spirituality out on their own. Well, Lillian Daniels isn't so sure. In this quote from a piece she wrote for the Huffington Post (I just want to give a caveat that she is a mighty sarcastic writer), she writes, "I explained I was tired of spiritual but not religious people who think they are unique, daring, or interesting because they can find God in the sunset. 'Thank you for sharing, Spiritual but not religious sunset person.... You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating.' My take is that anyone can find God in the sunset. What is remarkable is finding God in the context of flawed human community, in a

tradition bigger than you are, with people who may not reflect God back to you in your own image.”

She’s harsh isn’t she, but I find myself nodding along. What we are doing in the church, trying to follow these 10 Commandments, trying to follow Jesus. What we are doing is trying to let go of ourselves so that we are motivated by our love for God and others. This is what is radical about the Christian faith. So many other facets of our culture and even of our nature are geared towards helping me, me, me. But faith is about something bigger than I am. I am not the center of the universe and that is ok because God, who is the center of all things, is so good and I love these people he’s put me in community with. So, I can let go of some of my freedoms allowing them to be moderated by the fact that I love God and these people. Amen.