

“SUMMING UP EVERYTHING”

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20

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University Church of Chicago

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The two middle-aged couples went to dinner, as they regularly did on a Friday night. The men sat in the front seat of the car and the women in the back. After dinner on this particular night, the driver turned to his passenger and asked, “What was the name of that restaurant where we just had dinner?”

The man replied, “Oh, give me a minute. My memory is not what it used to be. I find myself unable to remember places and names. What is that flower that blooms at the end of a stem and is surrounded by thorns and has to have lots of sunshine and water?”

“You mean a rose?”

“Yes, that’s it!” The man cocked his head toward the back seat. “Rose, what was the name of that restaurant where we had dinner just now?”

Memory is a tricky thing, isn’t it? The Bible is based on memory, but more than just recalling. The Greek word *anamnesis* means re-presentation, rehearsing what is essential to us, to our faith. What do you expect from life? Do you expect that everything will go according to your dreams and wishes, that you will never have troubles—and if you do, they will be short-lived? Do we expect others to live according to our expectations of them? Do we expect the church to meet our every need? Do we expect our job to be rewarding and fulfilling and without conflict?

During the season of Pentecost, we have followed the Israelites as they made their way from the bondage of slavery in Egypt to the miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds to their journey through the wilderness of Sin to being fed with manna and quail from God’s goodness to this moment recorded in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Exodus. This passage (along with its parallel in Deuteronomy 5: 6-21) is a central pillar in Israel’s understanding of its relationship with God. It is, therefore, one of the most significant contributions of the Old Testament to the church’s theology.

To preach on all ten of the Ten Commandments in one sermon would exhaust both you and me. Truth to tell: it would be impossible to deal with the Decalogue in a typical twenty-minute sermon—even in an hour-long (God forbid!) sermon.

Do you remember the story of the pastor who preached on all ten of the Ten Commandments in one sermon? After that ordeal, one of his parishioners came out of the church door, limply shook the pastor’s hand and said, “Well, at least I haven’t made any graven images.”

The Ten Commandments are not merely a series of moral postulates, do's and don'ts that constitute a moral law. This passage compels us because it brings us to the central emphasis of the faith: it is the consummation of Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel. The law is given, and it is understood that not only are these instructions from God, but they are intended to shape human life in its every aspect.

The road to Sinai began at the burning bush where Yahweh summoned Moses to be the instrument of God's redemptive activity within Israel's life. At that decisive moment, the points of continuity were clearly drawn: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham...Isaac,...and Jacob" (3:6). Moses is directed to declare to the people: "Yahweh, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham...Isaac, and...Jacob has sent me to you" (3:15).

The covenant that is forged at Sinai is no new departure. It is, rather, the perpetuation and deepening of a relationship that extends all the way back to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his wives.

And covenant is the central issue here. The Ten Commandments do not descend into human life in splendid isolation from the larger drama. Yahweh's instruction to the people is not the orders of a master to slaves, although it is clear that God and Israel are not equals in the universal scheme of things. The commandments of God are God's gracious gift to the people, by which the people are provided with the means to respond to God's love.

Many, many years ago when I was in graduate school, I served four small churches in central Missouri—what Methodists call a four-point circuit. I preached at two churches on the first and third Sundays of each month and at the other two on the second and fourth Sundays. Except on Christmas and Easter when I raced among all four of them to deliver the Good News in one day. One of the churches—Blackwater Chapel it was called because it stood on the banks of the Blackwater River—existed seven miles from the nearest village. It had only a one-room church adjacent to a cemetery.

The people of that little congregation had a fund they called the Emergency Fund. It had accumulated about \$500 over a number of years. They told me that I, as the pastor, could use it to help anyone in need—as long as the person was not "a bum or didn't have a job or had no history of drunkenness."

So, I never gave any money to anybody who came by the parsonage, because most of the people who needed the money were jobless, living hand to mouth or had a history of alcoholism. As far as I know, that little church's Emergency Fund still has \$500 in it.

Far too much attention has been given to the negative language of the Ten Commandments, ignoring the fact that this was a traditional form of legal documentation in the ancient world. The mode of being faithful to God's call is not because of what one refrains from doing. As Jesus makes quite clear when asked about the commandments, they are seen to be extremely positive ideals: to love God without any reservations and to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12: 29-31 and parallels).

The University of Chicago has recently purchased the historic property one block south of University Church for forty million dollars. The faculty, students and papers of Chicago Theological Seminary will

move to a new location, and CTS will be remodeled and renamed: The Milton Friedman School of Economics. In light of what is presently happening in our country—indeed, in the world—I propose that we launch a massive protest against the naming of that school.

Do those self-proclaimed small government, anti-regulation, free-market zealots who were produced by Milton Friedman have no shame? Will they step up and take responsibility for wrecking the American economy and bringing about the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression?

Even now, with the house on fire, the most extreme among them won't pick up the fire hoses and try to put it out. These are the reckless clowns who led us into the debacle of Iraq in which we continue to spend ten billion dollars a month and by the time it's over—if it ever is, and John McCain says we can be there for a hundred years—we will have spent trillions of dollars. These are the same people who crafted tax policies that enormously benefited millionaires and billionaires while at the same time running up staggering amounts of government debt. This is the crowd that contributed to the greatest disparities in wealth in the United States since the gilded age.

This was the crowd that cut the cords of corporate and financial regulations that were put in place after the Great Depression so that what's happening today would not happen again. And, as James K. Galbraith points out in his new book, *The Predator State*, a lot of so-called liberals (like Bill Clinton) participated in the debacle, bowed under to the conservatives, went into a "protective crouch," and never said "Stop!"

Our problem is idolatry. When the Ten Commandments begins with a prohibition against idolatry, God is not talking about those little images you can see at the Oriental Institute at 58th and University. God is reminding us that when we worship anything—success or money or family or our homes—more than we worship God, we are idolators. And idolatry in whatever form distracts us from our pure devotion to God. A concern for self rather than others erodes our social and personal relationships.

Our culture tells us the ultimate lie: you are not going to die. If you just buy enough things, go enough places, have enough degrees, attain enough goals, you will not die. You will always be remembered. People will flock to your funeral and say wonderful things about you.

But the Bible says something else: All creatures die, but humans alone know they are mortal. And we must come to terms with our finitude, our mortality. We are created in *imago dei*, the image of God, but that concept is not rightly understood either by the idealism that champions it as reason and rationality and logic or by a naturalism that presents our lives as the result of processes of nature. Our lives remain a puzzle until they are confronted by God's revelation.

When we take the Sacrament this morning on World Communion Day, God renews the Covenant with us, affirms through the mystery and the miracle of the bread and wine becoming the Body and Blood of Christ that we are loved, forgiven, renewed and confronted. Our vulnerability to anxiety and our fear of emptiness are subsumed in the infinite good of God's love.

Only as a man or woman is enabled by the power of God's Spirit may he or she begin to approach the purpose for which the commandments were set forth, that is, to serve as a faithful response to the presence of God's redemptive activity in human life.

When we are motivated not by the letter of the law but by its spirit, then we can begin to live out the possibilities of redemptive love. Then we can respond to the gracious gift of God's grace.

Christian ethics does not come pre-packaged. The call is not to adhere to a list of rules and regulations but to live faithfully, to respond to God's call, to God's purposes.

There is an old Hasidic tale about a man named Avram Katz. Avram died, and when he went to heaven, he encountered the angels. He told them of his admiration for some of the great leaders of the faith. "Oh," said Avram, "if only I could have been Abraham, the patriarch of our faith, or Moses, the redeemer of our people, or David, the greatest of our kings, or Isaiah, the finest of our prophets."

Looking him squarely in the eye, the angel Raphael said to him, "Avram, we don't want to know why you were not Abraham or David or Moses or Isaiah. What we want to know is: Why weren't you Avram Katz?"