

It's So Easy To Love

Exodus 20:1-17

October 5, 2008

Then God spoke all these words:

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.

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.

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.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For 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.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

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.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

One of my favorite movie scenes is from *Scent of a Woman* with Al Pacino. Pacino plays the part of Lieutenant Colonel Frank Slade – a retired, cantankerous, and blind man who is forced to live with his daughter and her family. Slade’s family wants to get out of town without him for a weekend – and they hire a young man at the local prep school named Charlie to “look after uncle Frank” while they are away.

It turns out that Frank has also been waiting for this chance to get away, and he forces Charlie to take him to New York City where they indulge in some of the finer things in life.

So there they are – Frank and Charlie – in a fine dining room in Manhattan. A blind man and a prep school teenager. The scene opens with Frank dragging Charlie along to meet a beautiful brunette named Donna who is sitting a few tables away. Frank is quite the charmer – and when he realizes Donna has never danced the tango – he offers to lend his services.

As Frank stands to take Donna’s hand – he leans over to Charlie, “Charlie, my boy, I am going to need some coordinates.” Charlie answers him by saying that the dance floor is about 20 x 30 with tables on the outside. They are standing on the long end.

With that, the blind Lt. Col. Frank Slade and Donna take the floor – the band starts to play – and the dance begins. With elegance and poise, Frank leads the couple as they begin to tango. Matching the pace of the orchestra, Frank leads Donna through the dance – with promenade, twists, dips, pivots and a big finish – covering every inch of the floor and not once faltering. After the dance is over – the rest of the restaurant applauds and Frank leads Donna off the floor and back to their table where Charlie helps him take a seat.

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I thought about this scene as a read today’s text; one of the most recognizable passages in scripture.

Rather than seeing this familiar passage as a list of “don’ts” – consider this: All of the commandments – all of the “you shall nots” derive from the first commandment which is really not a commandment at all but a declaration.

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God. The God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

The first commandment is not a demand – it is a declaration. A declaration of freedom. The Lord is our God – therefore there is no need to worship other Gods, we are free to rest on the Sabbath, we are free from the oppression of idols, free to enjoy what God has given us instead of coveting what our neighbors have.¹

The preacher Tom Long describes the Ten Commandments – not as a burden to be carried by God’s people – but as a dance. In his words, “The good news of the God who set people free is the music; the commandments are the dance steps of those who hear it playing.”²

I am the Lord your God. You do not have to be God. You do not have to let money be your God. You do not have to let fear be your God. *I am the Lord your God.* That is our music – our good news. Everything that follows is a response to that music – a way to order our steps; a way to define the parameters of the dance floor.

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The Ten Commandments – or, literally, Ten Words – are one of the most recognizable pieces of scripture in the Bible. Yet very few people can recite them.

There has been a lot of talk in recent years about the public display of the Ten Commandments in court houses around the country. Yet even proponents of displaying them publicly have a hard time reciting what the Ten Commandments are.³ While there can be no doubt that the Ten Commandments have influenced the direction of public life

¹ Long, Tom “Dancing the Decalogue” *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2006, p. 17.

² *ibid*

³ See “The Colbert Report” September 5, 2008 (interview with Georgia Congressman Lynn Westmoreland) as cited in The Ekklesia Project (<http://ekkleziaproject.blogspot.com/2008/09/law-economy-freedom-and-community.html>)

and indeed many of the laws that govern our nation – they are not meant to be a public document.

Making a distinction between the public and a community, the poet Wendell Berry says, “a community, unlike a public, has to do first of all with belonging; it is a group of people who belong to one another and to their place. We would say, ‘We belong to our community,’ but never, ‘we belong to our public.’”⁴

When we hear the words, “I am the Lord your God” it becomes apparent that God is speaking to a particular people. Berry’s point is that the Ten Commandments don’t speak to a public; but instead give life within a community. And so rather than a disembodied list of rules for the public to follow, the Ten Commandments give those claimed by God a description for what it means to live as the people of God.⁵

* * *

I am the Lord your God.

And we are God’s people.

How we choose to live demonstrates how seriously we take this good news.

In the passage from John that Mary North read this morning, the disciples wanted to know how they could show their gratitude to their teacher – this rabbi that helped them to understand the gift of being claimed by the power of God. “Love one another” was Jesus response. “Love one another. Just as I have loved you; you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”⁶

In a few minutes we will do something that is full of mystery. We will gather around this table and we will pray for Christ’s presence to be with us as we break the bread and pour the cup. Today we celebrate the mystery of this meal with believers from across the world; folks

⁴ Berry, Wendell, Sex, Economy, and Freedom (as sited in Deborah Murphy’s article at <http://ekkleksiaproject.blogspot.com/2008/09/law-economy-freedom-and-community.html>).

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ John 13:34-35.

whose tables are different; whose language is different; whose traditions are different; whose skin is different; whose world view is different. And yet – we also celebrate this meal with people who claim a common heritage. For we know that each and every person from every corner of the earth who will gather today to break the bread and share the cup has heard the good news, the music that orders our steps: *I am the Lord your God.*

We have heard the good news that we belong. That we are claimed. That the God who created the world and called it good has called us too – and that because we are claimed and because we are called that God wants us to live in a particular way. That God has loved us so that we can love one another. That God has claimed us so that we will not hurt one another; or cheat one another; or lie to one another; or envy one another. That God is faithful to us – so that we can rest; from our work and in the knowledge that our God alone is faithful and true.

The parameters that God draws for us in the Ten Commandments – the dance floor that God defines for us – are not, then, limits on our freedom. Instead, they describe the way that we can be free.

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“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Demonstrating our gratitude to the God who saves us is not a bourdon to be carried – it is easy! I think about the couple from the movie – tangoing around the dance floor in an effortless fashion. When you hear the music and know the parameters of the dance floor – the steps just come.

You all may not realize it – but you are good dancers. You hear the music – and the steps come naturally. Trust me. I have witnessed it. I see the checks that come into the church office because you are moved to generosity. I hear about the trips to Houston to see Everett Morgan. I know about you standing up and raising a voice for the support of homeless veterans. I read about you getting involved in the life of our city through your work and your acts of compassion.

What is remarkable is not where you serve or who you serve – but how you serve. I have seen your joy in becoming involved in the things that you do – your acts of neighbor love – the work of the kingdom. I notice how easy it is for you to live out God’s call upon your life – and it gives me hope for the mission and ministry that God is calling our congregation to accomplish.

Yes – you all are good dancers. And that is probably because you hear the music clearly. The good gospel music that announces that the Lord is our God and we are God’s people.

I am the Lord your God.

And so we respond – joyfully, purposely, full of praise: our footsteps ordered by the One who frees us to love the God who created us and the neighbors who surround us.

Hallelujah! Amen.