

Sermon – Covenant of Boundaries
Sunday, March 7, 2021
Exodus 20:1-17, John 2:13-20
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Exodus 20:1-17. The Ten Commandments were presented by Moses at Mount Sinai following the Hebrews extraordinary rescue from Egyptian slavery. The God who gave them their freedom now offers guidelines and boundaries by which to live within the covenantal relationship. One of life's great paradoxes is that boundaries and limitations enhance life. Without the structure of laws, life can become anarchy and chaos. Terence Fretheim points out that eight of the Ten Commandments are negatively formulated. He contends that this *opens up life rather than close it down; that is, they focus on the outer limits of conduct rather than specific behaviors. Their primary concern is not to create the human community but to protect it from behaviors that have the potential for destroying it.* Our first scripture reading is interwoven within a responsive litany.

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.

Celebrate love at the center of every moment and every day. This is God's way.

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.

Celebrate the images of God all around without having to capture it in stone.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses God's name.

Celebrate God's name and bless the world when you speak it.

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.

Celebrate the wonders of God by finding the space and the time to revel in nothing but God.

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

Celebrate those who gave you life and fed you on love.

You shall not murder.

Celebrate by seeking out the life in each person.

You shall not commit adultery.

Celebrate the value and worth of the people around you.

You shall not steal.

Celebrate the wealth of life in sharing all you have.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Celebrate the truth by witnessing to the good in the other.

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.

Celebrate what God has given you, the unique gifts and qualities that make you, you. Amen.

As we turn to John's gospel, chapter 2, verses 13-22 we remember that Jesus, as a Rabbi, studied and honored God's law. Perhaps that is why he was so offended when he saw these laws, which were intended to provide wholeness and equity, being used to justify an unjust system of exchanging money for burnt offerings in the temple.

When the Book of John was written around 90 CE, the practice of burnt offerings had ended with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. John places this incident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke who place the story right before Jesus' crucifixion. John is less concerned with the chronological order of Jesus' ministry and uses some literary license in developing theological themes around the meaning of Jesus as the Word becoming flesh. Hear now the reading of holy scripture.

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. Amen.

The title of the sermon – “Covenant of Boundaries”

The Text: 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. Exodus 20:2-3

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, who brought us out of the house of bondage, thank you for the covenant of boundaries in the law which lead to freedom and abounding lives. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son...
it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms;
I lead them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.*

There are few scenes of tenderness in the Bible that can compare to the metaphor of God as One rearing and nurturing an infant. These words in Hosea 11 portray Israel's God, Yahweh, as One who gives birth to a people, from the crossing of the Red Sea...to One who nourishes and sustains the infant nation, providing manna and water through the stages of their faith journey in the wilderness as they grow into the people God intended them to be.

In today's scripture, the loving Yahweh, who is like a mother and father to Israel, provides the rules and boundaries, the ethical foundation that will make the forming of this people possible.... the sculpting of their lives within the Potter's hands.

Moses presented the Decalogue, the ten words or the Ten Commandments around 1300 BCE. These were not the first list of guidelines in ancient history, neither were they the only list.

About four hundred years prior to Moses (around 1700 BCE), Hammurabi, King of Babylon, bound himself and the people he ruled to 272 statutes, which he had inscribed on a pillar more than fourteen feet high for all in his kingdom to see.

The Code of Hammurabi brought a new order and stability by providing boundaries. For the first time, royal decree ceased to be arbitrary and the people were informed of the laws they were required to follow. Until Hammurabi, law was essentially the whim of the king. Laws were created at the king's fancy, and could be changed by him at any moment.

Four centuries later, Moses, who led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, gave another set of "laws" by which to live. These laws were not the laws of Moses—subject to change by any leader to follow—no, these were the law of their Yahweh God, the One who taught them to walk, the One whom they revered. These ten simple words embodied the mind and heart of God—irrevocable and unchangeable, which would carve them into a people "blessed to be a blessing." These laws were to be written on the mind and in the heart of the children of Yahweh for all time to come.

In this sense the giving of the Ten Commandments was unique. They were given to create the fullness of life, not simply a well-ordered life. They speak to our relationship to Yahweh, our reverence for life, and our respect for others and what belongs to them.

In the Decalogue, Yahweh teaches Yahweh's children the importance of saying "no" (thou shall not) because the truth is one cannot say "yes" to life until one has learned first to say "no," no to the distractions, the temptations, and the false idols along the way of growing up and coming into one's own.

The voices of our culture speak of unlimited choices and tell us we can and should have everything and have it NOW! Yet, studies in human development confirm the importance of "delayed gratification." Young children who are able to wait, to postpone, to delay gratification live more accomplished, fulfilling lives as they mature and develop. We can never underestimate the importance of accepting limitations and providing healthy boundaries for our children on their journey into adulthood in the wilderness of life.

What Yahweh hopes for Yahweh's children, the people of Israel, is what each one of us hopes for our children...that they will grow into loving, kind, yes—successful, but more importantly—generous people ... accountable for their lives and the choices they make, responsible to society and the faith communities to which they belong, and mindful of boundaries, honoring their own and respecting those of others.

The day Jesus walked into the temple before that Passover, his life had been shaped by these laws, the covenant of boundaries 1300 years after they were given to the Hebrew people. Jesus had learned them as a child, studied them as a rabbi, and taught them in his ministry.

When Jesus made a whip of cords and drove all of the money changers out of the temple, he was holding his community of faith accountable, God's lovely dwelling place. What began as a way for the Hebrew people to honor God in the burnt offerings of animals and temple tax had become a means to an end for those with religious authority and a way to profit from and to exploit not only God but also God's children.

As we continue our Lenten journey in anticipation of Christ's death and resurrection, John reminds us with this poignant story that although God could not be contained in the laws and practices of the Jerusalem temple, God chose to dwell within the temple of Christ's body.

After Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.' They realized he was speaking about the temple of his body and they believed.

With gratitude for Yahweh God who taught us to walk, for Christ Jesus who walked the way of sorrow on our behalf, and for the Holy Spirit who strengthens each of us for the walk that is ours, we wait and we hope patiently. Amen.