

“Invitation to Freedom”

The Rev. Eric Ledermann

First Reading: **Exodus 20.1-17**

¹Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You 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. ⁵You 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, ⁶but showing steadfast

love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For 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.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You 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.

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Gospel Reading: **1 Corinthians 1.18-25**

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” ²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this

age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a

stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

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Intro to “Ten Commandments” – meaning

The Ten Commandments are well known—even non-Christians have heard of them (giving you some idea of their reach beyond the world of Judaism and Christianity). Something with such reach should give us all pause as to the their relevance and importance in our

world.

These Ten Commandments are listed twice in the Hebrew Scriptures: in Leviticus 20, from which we read today, and Deuteronomy 5. Though they are known more commonly as the “Ten Commandments”, they are also known as the Decalogue, or, in Hebrew, the “ten words.” In Greek, “ten words” is translated as *deka logoi*: *deka* which means ten, and *logoi*, the plural form of the word for “word”, *logos*. Thus, in modern English, we get the Decalogue, or ten words.

They are said to have come down from God, to Moses at Mount Sinai while the Israelites were wandering the desert after having escaped Egypt after hundreds of years of slavery, and finally from Moses to the people of Israel after he had come down from the Mountain. They were given in the context of a people who had forgotten who they were, and to whom they belonged—namely, to God. They had forgotten how to be in relationship with God because they believed God had abandoned them during their Egyptian slavery. They wandered the desert,

following Moses, wondering if they might have been better off back in Egypt. So, God gave them the “ten words” to guide them in their journey through the desert and their journey back to God.

The first four “words” share how to be in relationship with God: put God first, don’t mistake the real presence of God with other things, don’t abuse this relationship, and trust God’s wisdom, taking time to rest and take care of yourself. The next six “words” share how to be in relationships with other people: honor your parents, gleaning from them the wisdom of their life experiences (both good and bad); don’t murder; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t lie; and don’t covet.

These “ten words” have had an incredible impact on the world as civilization after civilization have tried to apply these words to their own context, trying to carve out a peaceful existence through these infamous words from God. In our own time, these words have created both comfort and discomfort. We can all remember lawsuits over these ten words being posted in front of court

houses, and how that butted up against our modern, though diverse, understandings of separation of church and state. Some of these laws have been used to actually shape some of our own laws when it comes to our belongings and the belongings of others.

There have been thousands of papers and books written about these ten words. In fact, there have even been a number of take offs, like: the Ten Commandments for computer programmers and the Ten Commandments of customer service for retail chains. These are not particularly religious applications, but it gives us an idea of their universality.

There have also been all sorts of interpretations of these ten words, like the New Cajun Version. It goes something like this:

1. God is number one... and das' All.
2. Don't pray to nuttin' or nobody... jus' God.
3. Don't cuss nobody... 'specially da Good Lord.
4. When it be Sunday... pass yo'sef by God's House, now.
5. Yo mama an' yo daddy dun did it all... lissen to dem.

6. Killin' duck an' fish, das' OK... people - No!
7. God done give you a hu'band or a wife... sleep wit' jus' him or her.
8. Don't take nobody's boat... or nuttin' else.
9. Don't go wantin' somebody's stuff.
10. Stop lyin'... yo tongue gonna fall out yo mouf!

But, we know that different rules can mean different things to different people. There's a story about a man who, having lost his hat, goes to a church steal one, knowing there would be a wide selection of hats hanging on the coat racks. When he gets there, the priest was giving a sermon on the Ten Commandments. Something in the sermon caught the man's attention and gave him a flash of insight. He did not steal a hat.

After mass, the man felt compelled to go to confession to tell the priest what he was going to do. Once inside the confessional, the man says, "Forgive me father, for I have sinned."

"Go ahead, son," the priest says assuredly.

So, the man starts to explain, "Father, I lost my hat and I came to church today to steal a hat off of the rack."

Somewhat surprised, the priest responds, "Is that so?"

"Yes," the man says, "but when I heard you talking about the Ten Commandments, I changed my mind."

And feeling rather good about his sermon now, the priest responds, "Really? My son, did you make this decision when I was discussing the commandment: 'Thou shalt not steal?'"

"No," the man says. "It was when you started talking about, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery'. I suddenly remembered where my hat was!"

These commandments, aren't so much about a bunch of do's and don'ts. They are really about relationships—how we treat one another, how we treat God, and even how we treat ourselves. In fact, I would go so far as to say that these aren't commandments at all, these are

“words” of invitation, from God, to a way of life different from that which we are taught in this world. They are words of freedom, true freedom, built on understandings of respect for God, for ourselves, and for all of God’s children.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians about how all this “commandment” stuff, this faith stuff, is seen as foolishness of by those who do not share our faith. But, then he flips the tables. In verse 20 he writes, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

And I say, hasn’t God made foolish the ways of the world that tell us on bumper stickers, “The one with the most toys wins!” We know we can’t take our toys with us. Hasn’t God made foolish the ways of the world that tell us to do what ever it takes to get to the top, or, my personal favorite, “Second place is the first loser.”

The world doesn’t understand the grace of God’s words, God’s invitation to relationship, to love, to grace. I found a story about how the world sees all this foolishness:

There was a married man and woman whose names were Harold and Jane. They were not a very religious couple, but they tried their best. You see, they only went to church once a year, usually around Christmas time.

One Christmas, as they were leaving the church, the minister greeted them and said, "Harold, Jane, it's great to see you, but it sure would be nice to see you here more than just once a year"

"I know," replied Harold, "We're very busy people, leading very active lives. But, you may be happy to hear that we are pretty diligent about keeping the Ten Commandments."

"That's great," the minister said. "I'm glad to hear that you keep the Commandments."

"Yes, we sure do," Harold said proudly. "Jane keeps six of them and I keep the other four".

Harold and Jane, unfortunately, are only getting half the gift (or 60/40, depending on how you look at it). They aren't getting the whole package.

In the Gospels Jesus summarizes all the 613 laws of the Torah, including these "ten words" with: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And...love your neighbor as yourself."

This is really three things: 1) Love God; 2) love your neighbor; but also, 3) love yourself. This is about healthy love. If we have a healthy love of God, a REAL

relationship with God, we will learn to appreciate who we are as individuals, loving ourselves for who God made us to be. When we love ourselves in a healthy way, we can then look beyond ourselves and appreciate who God made others to be.

The one invitation we usually mess up more than the others is God's invitation to love ourselves. We love God, not always well, and we try really hard to love others, but we have some real self-esteem issues. When we can't love ourselves, we find other ways of defining our self-worth: trampling over whomever gets in our way as we climb that corporate ladder, looking down on others we deem worse off because it makes us feel better about ourselves. If we truly love ourselves, we wouldn't wrap our self worth up in our constant comparisons to others. We wouldn't feel we need to out maneuver, out perform, out educate ourselves compared to others. Rather than padding a college application or resume, we would spend our early years in school, and as parents encouraging our children to spend their time learning about and discerning who we are as God's children. We would spend our time

discovering our true gifts; not just what makes money, but what makes us complete, fully filled.

These “invitations”, as I like to call them, are more than just a bunch of do’s and don’ts. Paul sees the commandments as invitations to open our eyes and see the world as God sees it: full of beauty and worthy of respect. The Ten Words are about respect not only for God and other people, but for ourselves also. It works two ways: we show respect for God and all of God’s creation, including the people, and we may then grow in freedom to finally love and respect ourselves as part of the bigger picture; or we learn to love and respect ourselves for who God made us to be, and out of that growth of maturity we begin to see God and God’s creation differently, and even discern our part in it—we can’t help but grow to love and respect both God and those whom God has created.

So, here is your invitation yet again. It is the same invitation God gave to the people of Israel through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is the same invitation God shared with God’s children throughout the history of the

world. It is the same invitation God offered through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. **You are personally invited to be in relationship with God and a part of what God is doing in our midst. You are personally invited to discover your self worth, not in what you do or how much you earn, but through the free and freeing salvation of hope and grace that can only come from the One who created us, loves us, and sustains us.**

Do you, can you, accept God's invitation into the freedom of love, respect, and grace?