

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

Lent 3B
3 March 2024
Grace Church Newton

A few months ago I watched a true crime British miniseries called “The Sixth Commandment.” I confess that when I first came upon the title I was rather mortified to realize that I could not remember which commandment was the sixth. Was it killing? Adultery? Stealing?

I assure you, I know what the ten commandments are; I just can’t identify all of them by number. There is, you should know, an excuse for my confusion, because different traditions number the commandments differently – in some systems, “Thou shalt not kill” is listed as the fifth commandment. The first century Jewish philosopher Philo actually lists it as the eighth, after adultery and stealing. So if you have trouble knowing the commandments by number, do not worry – you are not alone!

When Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and others envisioned a pattern for Christian formation in the new Church of England in the 16th century, they determined that since most people were baptized as infants with no capacity to understand or commit to the Christian faith on their own, a good way to prepare older children for confirmation by the bishop was to have them memorize the Ten Commandments, as well as the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed.

I did this as a child; perhaps you did too. I’m one of those people who thinks that memorizing in Christian formation is actually a good thing, for adults and children, if it is accompanied by honest and open discussion about the content of what we are memorizing. But so often we do only one or the other, which is a problem: memorizing without reflecting and questioning makes us into unthinking automatons, and reflecting without deep knowledge leads to a faith that is superficial, based on our opinions rather than on real understanding.

Too often the Ten Commandments are trotted out simply as a list to be memorized, a formula for what to do and not to do in order to get into heaven. Christians have long misunderstood the Ten Commandments as proof that Judaism is all about externals, keeping the law, rather than one’s inner life and the power of God’s grace. This is, of course, a distortion, born of a profound lack of understanding of the function of law in Jewish life and prayer. In the Jewish tradition, following the Law is a response of gratitude to God for all of God’s saving acts.

And so it is for us, grafted onto this venerable and living tradition through Jesus. My friend Kristian, who was with you all last Sunday as presider and preacher, reminded me recently that according to Martin Luther, the commandments are not only restrictions on our freedom, but lead us to deeper freedom. Each “thou shalt not” is a doorway into a way of sanctifying our daily lives and relationships; each prohibition is meant to open up a multitude of possibilities for new life with God, with one’s family, with one’s neighbors, with the world. And it is only by accepting these apparent restrictions that we find true freedom.

No doubt you can discover, and have already discovered, ways in which this is true for you. It does not require living an extraordinary life, or taking up heavy crosses that are not yours to carry. It only requires listening to your own life, your own relationships, to discover where the invitation to freedom lies. In my own life, I am discovering this freedom, with great struggle, mind you, in a particular relationship – with my husband, John. In 2019, he was diagnosed with early-onset

Alzheimer's disease, and his dementia has progressed steadily since then. I care for him at home, and when I am at church or teaching, he is being cared for by others.

The commandment that follows "Thou shalt not kill" is the one that prohibits adultery – sexual unfaithfulness to the marriage relationship. In its simple and superficial form, this commandment has not been difficult for me to keep. But what I am learning is that faithfulness to a marriage is not primarily about restrictions on what I am allowed to do – it is an invitation to greater freedom in honoring, loving, respecting, and caring for my spouse.

Early on in John's dementia, it felt as if all there was *was* restriction, prohibition, as if my freedom were being eaten away. There are still many times when it feels that way. But I have noticed over the years a shift, glimpses of joy and freedom in honoring who John was and still is, glimpses that come from daily submission to the "law" of faithfulness to my marriage.

John is fascinated by license plates. Whenever we drive anywhere, he will read aloud the letters and numbers on the license plates of cars in front of us, as if each one is a code to be cracked, a new revelation waiting to be translated. When he first started doing this, it infuriated me. It was meaningless chatter, and all it did was remind me of the distance between John's present state and the man I married decades ago, in this very church. I was angry because I was sad, but I was still angry. And I would express this anger, maybe only verbally, but it was anger nonetheless.

This has been going on for years. But gradually the anger has receded – the recitation of each configuration of numbers and letters becomes a kind of incantation, a song celebrating what is all around us. And it has become easier to honor this song, even though it is different than the song John used to sing. Honoring it is honoring him, part of the freedom found in that seventh commandment given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

How does this happen? And how can we call this freedom? For me, the shift has been gradual, almost undetectable. It came from practice. It began as prohibition – don't get angry – and has morphed into a new freedom to find wonder and freedom in random letters and digits on a piece of metal. It began in an effort to control my response and has developed into a free desire for joy in the presence of the one I love.

Imagine the myriad of freedoms that flow from these ten commandments. When you spurn idols, you make yourself available to a God whose love knows no bounds and whose embrace is unconditional. When we commit to not making wrongful use of the name of God, we discover how powerful are the multitude of God's names for human flourishing. Honoring the sabbath is not simply a single day's cessation of work, but offers a lifetime of the freedom to experience the beauty and joy of silence, simplicity, community, and rest. A single instance of refraining from coveting what belongs to another can open up a thousand doorways into the freedom to serve one another with the material resources God has given each of us.

Each encounter in our life is an invitation to walk through the doorway from commandment to freedom. This invitation is ours through our oneness with Jesus in his Body here on earth. It will probably appear in unexpected places, in ways that only we can discern. But the invitation will come – it has come already, as close as the nearest license plate.

Glory to God, whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.