

Sermon

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Based on Exodus 20:1-17

“Commitment to the Code of Conduct”

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Someone once came up to Jesus and asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” And Jesus answered, “The greatest commandment is to love God with your heart, mind, soul, and strength. But there is another one equally important, which is to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. If you follow these two commandments, you are living right.” Love God, love neighbor. The key word is “love.” If you live a life of love, then you are living within God’s will. It could not be more simple, right? Well...it’s easy to say. It’s easy to remember that living right means to love. But it’s not always easy to do. We sometimes don’t feel very loving. There are some people we find extremely difficult to love. We have had our love spurned and it broke our heart, making us leery of making ourselves vulnerable again. Sometimes love requires doing or saying difficult things. Love is easy to say, a word that gets thrown around a lot. I love you and I also love rocky road ice cream. Love has the power to transform the world. Love also can be demanding. Love is what makes life worth living.

Love is also a great way to understand what the Ten Commandments are about. These commandments are more than just what you see on those billboards when driving along the highway or something people argue about being displayed at county courthouses. These commandments are not meant to be an exhaustive list of do’s and don’ts. No, these commandments emerge from a place of love. They are intended to serve as a set of guidelines that help us understand what living a life of love looks like. They are a teaching rubric. I want us to take some time today and revisit the ten commandments and think about their purpose and intent. There’s no time to explain each commandment. So I invite you to focus with me on why these commandments exist and how they can guide us in our journeys through the wilderness.

The ten commandments are grounded in what God did for Israel. God saw what the Egyptians were doing to the Hebrew people, how they were enslaved and oppressed. So God called forth Moses to lead the people out of Egypt toward the Promised Land. God initiated all this. God saw their oppression. God raised up Moses. God worked amazing signs of power. God led them through the wilderness. God brought them to Canaan, to their land of freedom. God did all this.

Now that God had done all this, having delivered them from bondage and brought them to a land where they could live in freedom, the question for Israel became, “How can we demonstrate our gratitude? Because you are our God, how do you want us to serve you?” See, this is the important point to remember about these commandments. God had acted to save the people from slavery. God acted first by claiming Israel as God’s people. Israel was the recipients of God’s gracious act of liberation. It was only natural for the people to want to know how the God that delivered them wants them to live. They couldn’t just say, “Thanks, God. We’ll take it from here. Why don’t you go on and find some other people to save.” That’s ridiculous. They owe their freedom to God. Without God they would still be enslaved. It was only right and natural for them to want to know how they might serve the God who had freed them. And so, God provides the people these commandments to help them get a sense of what was expected of them. God gave these commandments so that they have some direction on how to properly love God and love one another as a community.

What God gives Israel in these commandments is a kind of hedge. By that I mean a boundary line. If you stay on this side of the hedge all is good. But if you cross over the hedge you are straying into dangerous territory. One way to look at these commandments is God saying to Israel, “Whatever you do, make sure you obey these commandments. If you do these things, stay within the lines, you’ll be good.” Also, note that these commandments are all about action. They are about worshipping God instead of any other gods. They are about not making idols. They are about keeping the Sabbath, honoring your parents, not killing, or committing adultery, or coveting your neighbor’s stuff. These commandments are about how you live your life. There is nothing about

having correct beliefs. There is no theology in these commandments. These commandments are all about how we do life together. They are commandments that provide boundary markers that keep a community together, that keep a community ordered, that keep a community healthy, safe and life-giving. These commandments provide boundaries that make possible the flourishing of love for God and for your neighbor as yourself. If you want to be a part of a community of love, these commandments set up a hedge of protection for such a community. When the people ask their liberating God, “What do you want us to do?” God’s reply is, “Obey these commandments, and you are doing what I want you to do.”

So what about us? God gave these commandments to a specific people in a specific time in history. Are we meant to follow these commandments as well?

First of all, the God of Israel is our God too. As Christians, we believe there is only one God, the creator of the heavens and the earth, the source of power, the source of love and life. There is no other God. Our faith is not one that affirms the existence of a multitude of gods and goddesses. We believe there is only one God.

But also, let’s face it. The ten commandments provide an excellent code of conduct for us. These commandments are not all inclusive. They don’t cover every possible ethical challenge. And we can always boil it down to the bumper sticker: Love God, love others, love self. That’s it in a nutshell. But these ten commandments provide a bit more explicit direction for us as to what loving God and loving others looks like. They are boundary markers for us as well. We can be assured that if we abide by these ten commandments that we are on safe ground, that we are living a life of love that honors God.

Still, we have to acknowledge that abiding by this code is not always easy. Just for a few examples, in these times it is extremely difficult to keep the Sabbath. Long gone are the days where everything is closed on Sunday. It seems in these days many of us have to be flexible and choose some day other than Sunday as a day of rest, but even then we are tempted to run errands and respond to email. One day a week of “doing nothing” just feels wrong in a society where we are

driven to always be doing something productive with our time. And Jesus challenges us by saying things like, “You have heard...’You shall not murder,’ ...but I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of judgment...You have heard...’You shall not commit adultery,’ ...but I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” In an age of fake news, it’s pretty simple to retweet false information about people, or repeat stuff we read in the news about what anonymous sources tell reporters, also known as gossip and hearsay. Is not the passing along of falsehoods and half-truths bearing false witness against your neighbor? And there is endless debate about what “you shall not kill” means and how to apply that, even the translation of the word: is it kill or murder? Is it ok to kill one person in order to save the lives of many? So, yes, this is an excellent code of conduct. But life is often messy and the application of these commandments is not always simple. Love, just like life, is complicated.

God knows how hard this is for us. God knows that the power of sin, which has been broken by Jesus, is still active and effective. God knows how we struggle sometimes with knowing what is the right thing to do, much less actually do what we know to be right. God knows that we don’t always act with love. God knows that sometimes we harm others without intending to. God knows that sometimes when we are hurting, or confused, or tired, or angry, or afraid, that we are not our best selves and do and say things we later regret. We sometimes get it wrong. We are prone to miss the mark. None of this is a surprise to God. This is why God’s grace is so amazing. This is why it is good news that God is quick to forgive. This is why God is patient with us. This is why God’s Spirit dwells within our hearts, always working to heal, to stir up our conscience, to deepen our awareness, to mature us and make us wiser. We are works in progress and God is constantly working on us. And the work that God has begun in us will be brought to completion.

I think what it all comes down to is whether or not we will commit to this code of conduct. We’re never going to be perfect. I know it is part of the Wesleyan tradition we are a part of to expect to be made perfect in love in this life. When I was ordained, I had to say “yes” to that

question. I do expect to be made perfect in love in this life. This means that every thought, word and action is led by love. Being perfect in love doesn't mean not making mistakes. It means acting out of a place of love. But that's not always easy. Sometimes the repeated failures of living out of a place of love becomes discouraging. Sometimes we are tempted to give in or give up. But God does not give up on us. And if we don't give up on God, if we don't give up on love, keep ourselves committed to this way of life, then it will be o.k.

Also, remember that this commitment to follow these commandments is a commitment we make with God and with each other. You might remember last week I talked about how we are called to be a cross-carrying community. We are to confront and work through our suffering together. To survive we have to come alongside others who love us and who can ask us the question, "Where does it hurt?" The same is true for our commitment to God's code of conduct. We make this commitment with each other and look to each other to help us when we aren't sure what is the loving thing to do. Peer pressure has a role to play. What I mean is, it's a lot easier to follow through with commitments when you are surrounded by people who share the same commitments. One of the reasons why I go to the gym on a regular basis is because I know some regulars there and I don't want them to be wondering about why I haven't been around lately. I have to show up. We are a community that has committed ourselves to observe the commandments of the God who loves us. How might we apply peer pressure with each other to live by these commandments? Now, you know what I mean. I'm not saying we need to be bullying each other or guiltting each other to live by God's commandments. That wouldn't be loving, now, would it? The only point I'm making is that we can't help but influence each other, for good or ill. So we have the potential to influence each other in how we live out our commitments to God.

So which commandment do you need to work on the most? I wonder if there is a particular commandment that you are struggling with. I know a lot of people struggle with keeping the Sabbath. Maybe if you are honest you may have a few idols you sometimes place ahead of God. Or maybe you struggle with bearing false witness or you

sometimes covet something your neighbor has. Take a moment now and reflect on the commandments. Let me read them to you in a simplified format I came across:

1. Worship only the Lord God.
2. Don't worship idols.
3. Don't take the Lord's name in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.
5. Honor your parents.
6. Do not commit murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not lie.
10. Do not covet what other people have.

Which one of these speaks to you as one you need to focus on? Is there someone you can talk to about this, who can encourage you and keep you accountable? If you are drawing a blank, I invite you to keep thinking about it. Talk to God about it in prayer. Ask God to help you keep your commitments to this code of conduct, even as you express your gratitude to God who loves you and will never abandon you.