

A Lectionary 27 10.8.23

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Focus Statement: God wants for us to flourish in community.

I've maybe told you this story before, but my association with the Ten Commandments is a street corner preacher I once saw yelling them into the crowd of a busy LA shopping mall. I was working at Lutheran Bible camp at the time, and my summer of telling kids that God loves them left me with little time for this guy's declaration of all we needed to do to get into heaven. When he proclaimed the Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and mother," I yelled back, "That's not even the fifth commandment. Honor your father and mother is the fourth one." So, here's a fun fact for you right off the bat that several years and a seminary education gifted me with, there are various numbering systems for the commandments. You may have noticed they're not actually numbered in scripture, and different traditions break them up in different ways. But the heart of my issue wasn't with his numbering, it was his use of the Ten Commandments as a barrier for entry into the kingdom of God.

We were talking in Bible chat this week, and Joyce mentioned in the Jewish tradition she'd heard the Ten Commandments called not commands but sayings. And I love that because I think that gets so much better to what they are. The Ten Commandments weren't the code for how Israelites became God's people, they were instructions for how they were to live together as God's people. I'm sure I've shared this metaphor with you before as well, but one of my favorite seminary professors, a man named Ralph Klein who could read Hebrew and translate for us into English as easily as I'm reading from this manuscript. We used to joke he knew the Pentateuch so well because he journeyed with Moses, in the wilderness,

but anyway. He described the Ten Commandments as a playpen, a soft mesh barrier meant to keep them, keep us, safe and contained within the confines of God's love.

Let's take a look at where these rules came from and what good news they have for our lives. First off, notice where we are in the Exodus journey. This is not early in the travels; they've been on the road for a while. God has helped them escape from the Egyptians, provided food in the wilderness, and water in the desert. It is only after those things, only after they have seen that God is trustworthy, that God can and will and wants to provide for them, to meet their needs, that God gives them these laws.

Then we have God's own reasoning for the laws at the end. When Moses came down to deliver the laws to them, the text tells us they "were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance." And not unsurprisingly, since the declaration of the laws came accompanied by "thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking." I don't know about you, but if I was in the middle of the wilderness and all those things started happening, I would be scared too. But Moses was all, no, no, no, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of God upon you so that you do not sin." Which, ok, that sounds like a pretty scary statement up from, "God has come only to test you and to put the fear of God in you." Put the fear of God in you sounds like an old-timey threat from someone's southern grandma. But remember that fear can also be translated as awe or wonder, like looking out over the Grand Canyon or a storm coming in across Lake Michigan or the vastness of the Milky Way. And as for testing, remember two weeks ago with the Manna, bit of a broken record sermon here, when God was testing the Israelites to

see if they could follow God's directions. Remember we talked about how the testing God was doing there wasn't like, you better pass this test or you are out of the community. The only ramification for failing the test was you had to deal with a pile of moldy bread. Kind of gross, but not earth-shattering. The test wasn't about determining who was out, it was about reshaping the Israelites lives, ideas, ways of moving through the world. When they'd been in Egypt, their lives had been ruled by scarcity, fear, and violence. As they traveled to the promised land, God was working to reshape them into people of hope, generosity, and trust. That is the point of God's testing, to give the people opportunities to practice living in the world God wanted for them to live in.

With this context, the Ten Commandments shift from big, scary, "you better do this or else" demands for obedience to another opportunity for God to reveal Godself to us, to show us who God is and the kind of world and life in that world that God wants for us. A life very different than the one God had just led the Israelites out of. Don't murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, covet, all things the Israelites had experienced as slaves. The life and world God has for God's people is not that kind of a life, it is a different one, a richer one, a fuller one, a one anchored in love, support, and care for one another, because it is anchored in the love, support, and care of God. We get that promise in the very first line. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt... you shall have no other gods before me." Theologian H. Graf Reventlow notes that this command is stated not in the negative "that shalt not" but in the more declarative, "there shall not be with you." Which means, argues Reventlow, this isn't a statement of how we are supposed to act in the world, but a declaration of who God is and what God has done. This isn't a command so much as it

is a statement. There are a lot of things that think they are gods, a lot of distractions we may try to make gods, wealth, success, power, greed. Even things that are good for us like exercise, healthy eating, self-care, can become gods if they start to take hold of too much of our attention and sense of self. This first commandment is God's bold declaration that God alone is God. Even if and when we forget, even when other things start to capture our focus, this commandment holds for us the truth of who holds us.

Dear people of God, every one of the statutes is laying out for the Israelites, for us, the sort of rich, full, beautiful world God wants for us. It is a world still very much in progress, yes. It was when God first gave these statutes, it is today. These commandments are aspirational, we don't get there, we often fall short. But God loves us so much that after we can trust God gives us what we need, God goes a step further and gives us each other, gives us ways to live together, gives us everything we need not just to have life, but to have love and laughter and relationships. Thanks be to God whose vision for who we are and who we can be is so full. Amen.