

**"The Ten Commandments Revisited"**  
**Sermon for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**October 5, 2008**  
**Text: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20**  
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There are probably not many passages of scripture we know better than the Ten Commandments. We may not comprehend everything God wants us to do, but we are pretty clear about the fact that God does not want us to worship other gods, to make idols, to misuse his name, or to forget the Sabbath. Even if we are not Bible scholars, we know that God does not want us to dishonor our parents, to murder, to commit adultery, to steal, to lie about who someone is or what that person has done, and to covet what anyone else has. We understand that these are the big ones, the "no-nos" we are to avoid.

I have to confess that there is a part of me that has been uncomfortable with the Ten Commandments. Oh, I have known that they represent the best way for me to live. And I have realized that they are for my own good and that of everyone else. But they still have bothered me a little bit. I struggled for years to figure out what I didn't like about them, besides the fact that they are not always easy to obey.

In recent years I think I have figured out why this list of ten things had not been particularly appealing to me. It is partly because of what they are called, commandments. *Commandments*. Just that word sounds oppressive and domineering. *Commandments*. It sounds like I don't have a choice in the matter. The idea of commandments makes it

seem like my freedom is being violated. Not only is it what they are called that tends to turn me off, it's how they are stated. It's all so negative. *Don't* do this and *don't* do that. And so I asked myself, "Is there any way of seeing God's basic plan for us in a more positive way, a way that honors my freedom?"

I think there is, at least I've come up with a way of revisiting the Ten Commandments so as to see them more positively, yet without jeopardizing their integrity. I want to run this by you, to see what you think. It works for me, and maybe it will for you as well.

I prefer to think of the Ten Commandments as comprising boundaries. They function as boundaries for us. *They represent the limits to which we can function freely and still remain within God's will.* The Ten Commandments are boundaries for us.

You know how boundaries work, don't you? Let me ask you this: Did you have a sandbox as a kid? Picture that sandbox. A sandbox is a simple structure. It has sand, and with that sand an infinite number of creative things can be done. That sand can be used to make castles, forts, people, skyscrapers, trees, animals, whole towns, spacecrafts, and on and on. There is no limit to what can be imagined and then constructed in a sandbox, as long as there are four walls holding in the sand. Right? Those four walls function as the boundaries. Without them what happens to the sand? The rain comes and washes the sand into the yard surrounding it, and soon there is no sandbox in which to play.

Let me see if I can restate these Ten Commandments in a way that helps us to see that as boundaries, they allow us a tremendous amount of freedom and creativity, while at the same time, keeping us within the

limits of what is God's will and what is best for us.

God says to us first of all, that we are free to worship him in any way we desire. Any type of worship that appeals to us, that meets our needs, that brings us closer to a realization of who God is and who we are meant to be—any type of worship is acceptable to God. It can be high church, low church, or not even in a church. Worship can be contemporary, traditional, or blended. We can worship in a cathedral or around a campfire, as long as when we worship, it is the one, true God who is at the center of our worship and not some other, lesser god. That's the boundary.

We are free to represent God in any way we want to. We can let our imaginations go wild in seeking to depict the wonder, the majesty, the grandeur, and the awesome nature of God. Whatever works for us, we can use it to depict God. God can be visualized as male, female, young, old, white, black, rich, poor, far off, near by, wise or a little weird, stern and serious or wild and crazy—however we want to think of God, we are free to do so—just as long as we never make the mistake of confusing our *images* of God with the *reality* of God. God is always more than we can imagine. That's the boundary.

We are completely free to talk about God in any way we want to. We can get frustrated or angry with God. We can question the way God works. We can wonder at times whether there even is a God. We can make jokes about God, and we can laugh at the things God does. What we can't do is to seek to use God for our own selfish purposes, to promote our particular agenda in some way. That is the boundary.

We are free to use our time as we see fit. We can work all we want

to and work at anything we want to. We don't have to work, if we don't want to. We can do with our time whatever we feel will be most beneficial to us and to those we love, as long as we allow enough time for prayer and play. That is what the Sabbath is for, prayer and play, or what we might call righteous relaxation. One seventh of our time is to be spent in such prayer and play, so that we can maintain our relationship with God and our health as human beings. That's the boundary.

These are the boundaries we must honor with respect to God. Now let's look at the boundaries that affect our relationships with each other.

We are free to relate to our parents as we think best. Even though we love them, we don't have to like them. We don't necessarily have to spend a great deal of time with them, especially if we don't like them. A wise woman once told me that there are loved ones and family members, and they aren't always the same people. When it comes to our parents, we certainly don't have to allow them to mistreat or abuse us. We also don't have to agree with or support what they choose to do, no matter how inappropriate or self-destructive it is. And we don't have to meet their expectations of us, especially when they are completely unrealistic. But we have to live our own lives in such a way that brings them honor and that is respectful of them. That is the boundary.

We are free to have as many or as few friends as we want. We are free to shape those relationships as we see fit. We can be extroverts or introverts. Our idea of a good time can be to have a party at our house every week with the whole town invited, or it can be to sit alone and watch DVDs or read books. It doesn't matter. We can choose to relate

to our neighbors as we want, as long as we don't murder them. That's the boundary.

Our marriages can be as creative as they need to be in order to meet our needs. No two marriages have to look alike, and they probably shouldn't because of the individuals involved. We are free to make the rules that govern how we live together as spouses. There simply is no one pattern that all committed relationships have to be forced to fit. But sexual intimacy is never to be sought outside of marriage, no matter what that marriage looks like. That's the boundary.

We are free to borrow everything our neighbor has and forget to bring it back for years, but we can't steal. That's the boundary. As I suggested before, we are free to feel however we want to about our neighbor. We don't have to like him, his wife, his kids, his dog, his religion, his politics, or the way he keeps his yard. But we must never say anything about our neighbor that is not the truth. Honesty must characterize all that we report concerning what our neighbor says or does. That's the boundary. And finally, we are free to wish for anything we want, as long as we never make the mistake of wishing we were someone else or wishing we had what someone else has. That's the boundary.

Our God is a God of grace. Have you figured that out yet? A part of what that means is that *even when God gives us so-called commandments, they are full of grace.* Do you see that? As God's children, we are encouraged and enabled to play out our lives in the freedom of the sandbox of God's creation. We can design what we want, shape what we want, mold what we want, fashion what we want. We can

level what we have made in that sand and start all over again. We can use our intellects, our talents, our creativity, and our imagination in any way we choose. The sandbox is ours. God says, "Go to it. You are free. Make the most of it. Build to your heart's content."

But there are boundaries around our sandbox. Ten of them. And *we desperately need those boundaries*. We simply could not function without them. They hold our lives together and keep them from being washed away when the rain comes. The boundaries are good for us. They don't limit our creativity; they don't restrict our freedom. Not at all. Instead they keep the sandbox of our lives intact, so that we can continue to be as creatively free as God made us to be, day after day after day after day.