

The Shape of Freedom
Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17
October 7, 2018
Northminster Presbyterian Church
Rev. Michael D. Kirby

Pastor Michael's Opening Prayer for October 7, 2018

Living Word, we don't know what to pray today.

Well, we know to pray our thanks — for life, for love, for this gathered community; for those who are joining their journey with ours today as new members; for the freedom to worship; for the right to disagree. We are grateful too for words of justice spoken by our fellow citizens this week.

But we live in a world that has so often silenced those voices and moved from disagreement to discord. Some of us today are weary of a season of verbal and political warfare; some of us are compelled to taking sides — for survival, for justice, for principle, for the protection of those we love.

But we all grow weary of warring words, those that have been spoken so often they have lost their meaning; those that wound; those that we can barely croak out — we have screamed them for so long.

Living Word, we are out of words. Could this be your gift to us, this empty well from which no more words of our own can be drawn? If, even for a moment, we have no words, then maybe there will be space and time to breathe and to listen, and to remember that listening for your living word, when there are no adequate words of our own, is also a prayer.

So, we listen and hope. And worship wells up in us yet again with love and grace — enough for today; enough for this moment. Amen.

Sermon

Twenty-five years ago, it was a scene many were talking about. It takes place about half way through the Academy Award winning movie, *The Scent of a Woman*.¹ Al Pacino plays Frank Slade, a former Army Ranger Lt. Colonel, who was blinded in an accident caused by his own arrogance and bravado. The scene in question takes place in a hotel restaurant. Lt. Colonel Slade and Charlie, the high school student reluctantly acting as his eyes slash handler, strike up a conversation with a young woman and Slade offers to teach her the tango.

As they prepare to take the floor, Slade turns to his companion and says, "Charlie, I'm going to need some coordinates here." Charlie proceeds to describe the size and shape of the ballroom — where the band is and how much room Slade will have. And that is all he needs. For the next three or four minutes, we see Pacino's character teach her the tango, starting slowly in the middle and working their way out and out and around until their dance has covered most of

¹The idea for this scene to serve as an illustration for this text was first suggested by Rev. Pen Peery, referenced in the 2014 Well Paper of Rev. Becca Messman, which served as a guide for much of this sermon as noted.

the floor. It's supposed to be a moment when we see a bit of hope re-emerge for Slade's character who has already stated his intent to end his life.

I don't know about you, but I've spent my fair share of the last couple of weeks trying to find my footing. Unprecedented claims against a Supreme Court nominee, the tensions of a city that, let's be frank, anticipated that officer Van Dyke would be acquitted like so many before him. Wondering how as a man, a white man, a privileged white man from the suburbs, wondering what was and what should be my role in all of this as it unfolded? I should have remembered — after all, this text was looming. It's not like I didn't know that. But I guess I had forgotten, forgotten what I think most people forget when they consider this ultimate Top Ten List.

We seem to be made for lists. They feed our modern short attention span and we also seem to like having them; they allow us to engage the world in a somewhat orderly fashion, whether it is actually orderly or not. The two hottest news sites on the internet, Buzz-Feed and Huffington Post, are filled with what is now called listicals — articles which are actually just lists. And the most popular are, of course, the 10 things you must do to (fill in the blank) — lose weight, keep your hair, land a husband, live longer...

But today we encounter the first one, the ultimate, the top ten of top tens, perhaps the reason we have top ten lists in the first place. The Decalogue some call it; the 10 Words others call it; the Ten Commandments for most people. Have you noticed though, it isn't actually ten of anything. If you count the distinct declarative sentences in the Hebrew, there are anywhere from 14 to 17 statements, depending on how you divide them. And you may not know that there is much disagreement about what the 10 specific commandments are. Contemporary Jews divide the list one way, the Orthodox Church another, Roman Catholics yet another, and most Protestants follow still another editing regimen. For example, "You shall not kill" is the sixth Commandment for Orthodox and Jewish and Reformed scholars, but the 5th for Catholic and Lutheran practitioners and the 7th for the communities who follow the writings of the Greek theologian Philo. Rest easy, though. Everything ends up in there; it's just how it gets grouped that is the subject of disagreement.

But it's not the numbers that first capture our attention in the grouping of chapters 19 and 20 together today. It's that word commandment because God does not specifically say anywhere in today's text that God commands us to do them, only that God commands Moses to tell this to the Israelites.

What does Yahweh say, "I'm the God who brought you out of slavery" and then, "You shall not." God isn't making a list of commands; God is describing the people God has made covenant with, teaching the people how to live out from under the tyranny of Pharaoh — out of slavery. But the tense of the verb seems to assume that compliance and obedience will be a part of the deal, as if there is any doubt.

What I had forgotten was that this wasn't what we have called it for three thousand years — a list of do's and don'ts to get on God's good side. It was a description of what it is like when we live in the midst of the priestly kingdom of Chapter 19. God doesn't make demands; God describes what are the blessings and behaviors of living in the heart of covenant with the maker of the stars, the author of love and grace itself.

Though I certainly could be wrong on this, it doesn't appear to me that God is demanding that

anyone do these things, merely stating what being one of God's chosen people looks like, like me saying "the sun shall rise tomorrow morning." I'm not commanding the sun to come up; I'm just noting that it always does. So, I'll come clean, I disagree with my Christian brothers and sisters who see this as the ultimate guide to all laws and ethics. I completely reject that this was intended as something to be placed in state or federal courthouses as a guide to what civil laws should look like. No, because no one is forced to live by these principles; these are statements about a lifestyle that was countercultural in Moses' day and is countercultural in ours. These verses are trying to say something about God and about our relationship with each other when we choose to be, or are inspired by the Holy Spirit to be, a part of this family.

What it describes are the "coordinates," to use Colonel Slade's term, of the dance floor of the Kingdom of God. It sets the parameters within which we are invited to live, to thrive, to dance. Every one of these so-called commandments suggests a way to be free, a way to be freed from something that can eat away at our lives, a way to be freed for a life centered in joy, grace and love.

It appears that this list is intentionally crammed together (the commandments appear again in Deuteronomy in almost exactly the same structure). It seems they are meant to be considered together, not on their own, and they are meant to be considered collectively by those who hear them, not on our own. As my colleague in The Well, Rebecca Messman, puts it, "It's as though there is a warning sign on these tablets that says DO NOT ATTEMPT ALONE."

The Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes is a Methodist minister currently serving in Massachusetts. A few years ago, on his blog "Unfolding Light," he suggested that we've gotten the decalogue all wrong for so many years because we chose to see it as a rule book, instead of encountering it as the parameters of a life that is free...²

In this life we don't run around in slavish devotion to the fad gods of the moment — success, celebrity, power, wealth, this diet plan, that investment strategy, this political party or that denomination. We place our hope only in the very source of life and light and love and peace.

In this life we don't define ourselves and our relationships by what we have that they don't, or don't have and they do, or for that matter, who that person loves instead of me. We define ourselves by a gracing love that says you are enough and still loves us enough to show us the way out of our blind stumbling back onto the dance floor. In this life we don't take anything or anyone for granted — those who came before us, those all around us whose lives may well be in our hands, and the God who loved us into being — and so we honor and respect and worship. In this life, we realize we aren't God, and so we make space for rest and renewal, and we never assume it is our right to take the life of another just because we want to.

So, does God's description of the covenant life mean there are things we don't do, shouldn't do? Sure. But not in a turn or burn, do this or die fashion, but with the promise that a life lived out inside these coordinates is our greatest opportunity for living the joyful dance to which we are called.

What must it have been like to hear this new way of living, to be wandering in the desert and hear the covenant promises of Yahweh giving them the coordinates for a new identity, a new

² <https://www.unfoldinglight.net>

dance floor on which to live? Were they scared? Were they joyful? Were they confused? Did they start disagreeing on whether there were 10, 11 or 14 commandments right away? We don't know. What we do know is that just before this happened, they were desperate for a sense of identity, even willing to worship a golden calf if it would make them feel like somebody's again.

But today God changes that. They are now the people God delivered from slavery and they can claim that identity, link their story to Yahweh's story like their ancestors did, and start again. And if they will do that, they will be slaves to no people, to no Pharaoh ever again because Yahweh doesn't want slaves. Yahweh wants a people who live gratefully and whose obedience is born not of simply a desire to do the right thing but to respond to the grace they have received from God by living out their freedom in a way that Jesus summed up as loving God, loving neighbor and loving self only as much as we love others — truly a joyous dance of humanity and God.

The great scholar theologian Karl Barth believed that in any given situation there was one answer that was an exercise of true freedom, and all others were slaves to sinfulness. And maybe he was right. But if that's how we look at it, life seems an endless test we are destined to fail. But what if the dance floor has been set out by a God who knows we will wander from it but who never stops the music of grace that calls us back to the dance? God gave us these coordinates — this layout of the dance floor — not principally to hem us in, but as a gift, a sign of God's loving will for each of us. So, will you, will I, will we join our story to God's story, to Christ's story and claim these, not as rules that bind us but principles that give shape and hope and joy and purpose to our freedom? Are we ready to dance?

AMEN