

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

17th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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Text: Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17

Title: "A Way Out of No Way: Consecrating"

I'd like you to find something to write with if you can and find some blank spaces on your bulletin or find a pew envelope or something because we're going to have a little fun with a quiz this morning. I have several questions for you to answer and you can just jot down shorthand answers somewhere.

1. Jot down as many of the ingredients found in a McDonald's Big Mac as you can remember.

(play Jeopardy theme song)

Big Mac Ingredients: two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onion, sesame-seed bun

2. Name as many of Santa's reindeer as possible.

(play Jeopardy theme song)

Santa's Reindeer: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, Blitzen, Rudolph.

3. Name all the states that have direct access to one or more of the Great Lakes.

(play Jeopardy theme song)

Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Minnesota, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York

4. Finally, list as many of the Ten Commandments as you are able. Allow 60 seconds on this one.

(play Jeopardy theme song)

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make idols.
3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.

7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet.

It's a bit poetic that 10 years ago Promenade Pictures released the animated movie "The Ten Commandments". As part of their marketing, they commissioned Kelton Research to take a poll and ask people about their recall of Big Mac ingredients vs. the 10 Commandments. The conclusion was that eighty percent of Americans knew the Big Mac had two all-beef patties while just over 50 percent knew "Thou shalt not kill" was a commandment. Only 14 percent knew all 10.

And this wasn't just those who don't consider themselves religious but even those who attended church or synagogue at least once a week have a bit of trouble naming them all. According to my source, the top two mentioned commandments — Thou shalt not kill and Thou shalt not steal — were recalled by 70 percent and 69 percent respectively. The Big Mac was more memorable — 79 percent knew of its all-beef patties and 76 percent knew it came with lettuce.

It's an interesting phenomenon that people get very excited about removing the 10 commandments from public places but most cannot even tell you what they are. This is how those commandments are given according to Exodus. See how you did on the quiz.

3 Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6 but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

7 So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him.

20 Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before[a] me.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation[b] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

13 You shall not murder.[c]

14 You shall not commit adultery.

15 You shall not steal.

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.
(Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17 (NRSV))

The Hebrew people had been freed from being enslaved by a greater power, the Egyptians. According to Exodus they have endured the threat of a forced return to enslavement as they--in their fear--blamed Moses for talking them into leaving in the first place. God delivered them from their fear and the threat they faced. Now they are free. Finally free! Now what?

They are a people with no laws, no boundaries for living in community given they are now on their own. No longer do the Egyptian laws apply. No longer do the oppressors determine what they will do and what they won't. No longer are they told when to work and when not to work. No longer are they restricted from travel. No longer do the people in power determine their destiny. And so the first thing God says to this freed people is: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;" a reminder from the very start that God has given them freedom and that from this point forward they are to be consecrated—set aside for a holy purpose—as God's people. And the way in which they will be different is in their use of the freedom God has given. The way in which they are to use that freedom is outlined in what we call the 10 Commandments. The first 4 have to do with the vertical relationship with God:

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make idols.

3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

The remaining 6 have to do with the horizontal relationship with other human beings:

5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet.

Although most people cannot name them all, for many people somehow these have become a list of finger-wagging “thou shalt nots” when it comes to personal behavior. For others they are yokes that should be imposed on a rebellious society. If they were, all would be well, according to the latter group.

However, I appreciate what Dr. Thomas Long writes about what he calls the Decalogue—the 10 commandments:

Understanding the Decalogue as a set of burdens overlooks something essential, namely that they are prefaced not by an order--"Here are ten rules. Obey them!"--but instead by a breathtaking announcement of freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). We will probably always refer to the declarations that follow as the "Ten Commandments," but we can also think of them as descriptions of the life that prevails in the zone of God's liberation. "Because the Lord is your God," the Decalogue affirms, "you are free not to need any other gods. You are free to rest on the seventh day; free from the tyranny of lifeless idols; free from murder, stealing and covetousness as ways to establish yourself in the land."

The Decalogue begins with the good news of what the liberating God has done and then describes the shape of the freedom that results. If we want to symbolize the presence of the Ten Commandments among us, we would do well to hold a dance. The good news of the God who set people free is the music; the commandments are the dance steps of those who hear it playing. ...

I like Dr. Long's suggestion. That the Decalogue is about the God who offers freedom and this list of commands is a way to live in that freedom and celebrate it. Far from a heavy burden, they are ways to honor and respect the life God has given. “The good news of the God who set people free is the music”, he says, which reminds me of a song. If you'll turn in your hymnals to page 261: “Lord of the Dance.”

1. I danced in the morning when the world was begun, and I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun, and I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth. At Bethlehem I had my birth. Dance, then, wherever

you may be; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he. And I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.

2. I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee, but they would not dance and they would not follow me; I danced for the fishermen, for James and John; they came to me and the dance went on. Dance, then, wherever you may be; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he. And I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.

3. I danced on the sabbath when I cured the lame, the holy people said it was a shame; they whipped and they stripped and they hung me high; and they left me there on a cross to die. Dance, then, wherever you may be; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he. And I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.

4. I danced on a Friday and the sky turned black; it's hard to dance with the devil on your back; they buried my body and they thought I'd gone, but I am the dance and I still go on. Dance, then, wherever you may be; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he. And I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.

5. They cut me down and I leapt up high, I am the life that'll never, never die; I'll live in you if you'll live in me; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he. Dance, then, wherever you may be; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he. And I'll lead you all wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.

“I'll lead you all in the dance said he.” Jesus, like us, was an inheritor of these 10 ways of living, and when he was pressed to name which of these and all the others in the Old Testament were the most important, he affirmed only two: love God—the vertical relationship AND love neighbor—the horizontal relationships. The first 4 commandments are covered by loving God and the last 6 by loving neighbor.

Yet, there is only so much God can do for us. God gave the Hebrew people freedom but they had to choose how they would live into that freedom. Likewise there is only so much God can do for us. It is our choice whether or not to make a commitment to living into our identity as God's called and chosen ones. It's our choice whether or not to dance with the Christ and celebrate the beautiful gift of freedom God provides. We decide how we will embrace the One who loves us, forgives us and seeks to lead us into a consecrated life. Remember that, make a commitment to this way of life, and we will never be lost wanderers.