

"God's Gracious Commandments" A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
March 4, 2018 Third Sunday in Lent
Exodus 20:1-17

Let us pray together: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

How many of you have heard of Judge Roy Moore from Alabama? He is the guy who was removed as chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. You may also be familiar with his 5,280-pound Ten Commandments monument that he had chiseled from a block of Vermont granite. Judge Moore lost a stubborn fight to keep the monument at the Alabama Supreme Court building.

What I didn't know was that Roy Moore has made many public appearances with the monument. It travels with him on the back of a flatbed truck with a 23-foot-high crane that strains to move the 5,280-pound monument off the flatbed truck at the various locations that the monument and Judge Roy Moore appear. The *Atlantic Monthly* (October 2005) notes that when the monument returned to Alabama for cleaning "a fifty-seven-foot yellow I-beam crane that spans the ceiling of the Clark Memorials warehouse drops down to retrieve the Rock from its chariot, and even this one—a five-ton crane!—buckles visibly under the weight."

Today, I read the Ten Commandments from Exodus. They are also repeated in Deuteronomy, Chapter 5. When you heard me reading them, did you hear a list of 'thou shalt not's'? If you did, you are not alone. It seems that the general religious population thinks of the commandments as burdens or heavy obligations. Some think that the commands are heavy yokes necessary to keep our rebellious society under control.

Using the Commandments and laws to keep people under control was something even Jesus dealt with: Matthew 23:4 Jesus talks about the Pharisees. **They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.** Perhaps Judge Roy Moore's 5,280-pound monument is a perfect symbol of how many in our society consider the Ten Commandments.

Ma and Pa made their annual visit to church for the Christmas Eve service.

As they were leaving, the minister said, "Pa, it sure would be nice to see you and Ma here more than once a year!"

"I know," replied Pa, "but at least we keep the Ten Commandments."

"That's great," the minister said. "I'm glad to hear that you keep the Commandments."

"Yup," Pa said proudly, "Ma keeps six of 'em and I keep the other four."

Is this how we think about the Ten Commandments - laws to keep – rules to obey - a 5,280-pound burden around our neck? As one of my friends often says, 'I don't think so!' The Ten Commandments are not prefaced by an order. What I read doesn't say, here are the rules, obey them.

Something very important is left out of the listings of the Ten Commandments. Judge Roy Moore's monument doesn't have it. Verse 2 is quite important. **I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.** These few simple words tell us who is giving us the Ten Commandments. The God who liberated the Hebrew people, who brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

God is a God of liberation. As a free person, you can think of the Ten Commandments as descriptions of your life when you live in God's liberation. You are free to not need any other gods. You are free to rest on the Sabbath. You are free from meaningless idols, stealing and coveting. You serve a God of liberation and freedom, not a god of rules and heavy, burdensome laws. As one commentator said, "The Commandments are not weights, but wings that enable our hearts to catch the wind of God's Spirit and to soar." (*The Christian Century*, March 6, 2006)

Think about the Ten Commandments as allowing you to be cared for by God. Think about the Ten Commandments as providing you the opportunity to be set free to live a life serving our God.

Robert Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a volunteer fireman and ambulance attendant who, as a child, had to have some of his teeth extracted under general anesthesia. Jack was terrified, but a nurse standing nearby said to him, "Don't worry, I'll be here right beside you no matter what happens." When he woke up from the surgery, she had kept her word and was still standing beside him.

This experience of being cared for by the nurse stayed with him, and nearly 20 years later his ambulance crew was called to the scene of an accident. The driver was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and Jack crawled inside to try to get him out of the wreckage. Gasoline was dripping onto both Jack and the driver, and there was a serious danger of fire because power tools were being used to free the driver. The whole time, the driver was crying out about how scared of dying he was, and Jack kept saying to him, recalling what the nurse had said so many years before, "Look, don't worry, I'm right here with you, I'm not going anywhere." Later, after the truck driver had been safely rescued, he was incredulous. "You were an idiot," he said to Jack. "You know that the thing could have exploded, and we'd have both been burned up!" In reply, Jack simply said he felt he just couldn't leave him.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. First comes the experience of being cared for. God brings us out of slavery and sets us free. Free to worship him, free to live a life unencumbered by so many burdens that could weigh us down. Free to share that care with others.

The Ten Commandments continue the covenant that God made with Noah. The God revealed in the story of Noah is adaptable, caring and willing to accept hurt to keep hope alive. The Ten Commandments continue the covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah. In that covenant, God walked beside both Abraham and Sarah as they traveled following God's direction and as they raised Isaac, the child they didn't think possible.

For us today, the covenant still stands. God is there, standing beside us like the nurse saying, "I'll be right here beside you." That influence frees a man to become a man risking his life for a stranger because he knows in his bones that he just can't leave him. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you . . . out of the house of slavery" prompts us to live lives shaped by the freedom created by that God. That love frees you and me to serve God with joy and delight, living and loving as Christ did.

Did you catch verse 6 in today's reading: **but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.** That love extends to us today through God and Jesus.

"To see the Ten Commandments as declarations of freedom is far more satisfying than hauling around tons of dreary obligation and worrying about whether the springs and shocks are going to hold up on the flatbed truck." (*The Christian Century*, March 6, 2006)