

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to the First Parish of Wayland on February 2, 2014

The ground literally shook. Lightning lit up the sky, and the thunder was so loud the people cowered. Something awesome was about to happen. This is how the scene is set for the appearance of the Ten Commandments.

We take them for granted now or they have become just another symbol for religious liberals and conservatives to fight over or we joke about amending them into the “Ten Suggestions.” To many they seem like something primitive and quaint out of a past that has little to teach us. I am sure that even those who advocate posting the Ten Commandments in court rooms and school buildings think of them as a bunch of ancient prohibitions – a list of “Thou Shalt Nots.”

I firmly believe, however, that ancient people may have been ancient, but they weren’t stupid. If they felt that something was terribly important, they may have had good reason to feel that way, and we should take them seriously. And, I’m going to suggest there is a very powerful idea at the core of these commandments, an idea that is not – as most people presume – a prohibition. Instead, it is permission. The Ten Commandments give permission that we vitally need to take our self, our life and the lives of others more seriously.

In talking about the Ten Commandments I am going to tell a story, and the character God is a major force in that story. Some of you will notice that I am using that character’s name more than I usually do. Don’t let it distract you or you will miss the point of this sermon.

Let’s revisit them again but this time not as children listening to them in church school. We’re going to take the text as text and not worry about whether it is history, and we’re going to talk about it as adults who have lived a while and now know some of the traps that adults can fall into. In order to do this we have to listen to the story on its own terms and not try to shape it with our own presuppositions.

Let me set the scene. The sky darkens. The ground shakes. Something important must be about to happen. Then out of the thundercloud

a voice speaks, and it is God speaking to Moses. But, God's self-description is the key to what the story means. First listen to what God does not say to describe who God is.

God does not say "I am the creator of heaven and earth." God does not say "I am more powerful than you can believe." God does not say, "I am smarter than every last one of you suckers." God does say, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery." "Out of the house of slavery." God's self-description is: "I gave you freedom." The Ten Commandments are a testament to freedom today as much as when they were issued. . That's the point I want to make. And here is an example.

"Honor your father and your mother so that your days may be long in the land that God is giving you." That is one of the commandments to which, right away, some will respond, "Well I don't know about that!" People who have complex relationships with their parents may hear this as offering them even more grief and guilt. Unpacking troubled childhoods has been the substance of many novels and much therapy so honoring parents may not necessarily sound like an idea in harmony with your mental health. But it is.

Listen again very carefully to what that commandment does not say. It does not say, "Listen to your father and mother and do everything they ask of you." It does not say, "Copy your father and mother because you can't possibly improve on them." It does not say that we should be prepared to feel incredibly guilty every time one of our parents gets a little bit cranky. It does not even say that we should love our parents, because love is something that cannot be forced. It says that we should honor our parents.

What does that mean and what does it have to do with freedom? When we honor our parents we recognize that they are the people who gave us a portion of their lives so that we could become independent adults. We honor that gift best by remaining independent adults, capable of appreciating the people who sheltered, clothed, fed, taught and, to the best of their ability, loved us but we must also be capable of knowing where our parents' lives stop and our own lives must begin.

The first step in honoring our parents is recognizing that being limited and fallible people, they did the best they could in a role for which almost nobody is a natural and few are even very well prepared. I am sure almost

everyone wishes his or her parents had done something differently. I am sure there are times when most parents wish they had done something differently. The gap between what we believe we ought to do and what we finally accomplish will always be wide. Thank God it is, or we would be willing to settle for giving too little of ourselves

But the commandment goes even further. It asks us to honor our parents so that we can live a long and useful life. How is long life related to respecting one's parents? Here the deeper meaning of this commandment – and of all the commandments – deals with the freedom each of us needs to develop as people. And when I speak about freedom, I am not just speaking about freedom from known tyrants. I am speaking particularly about freedom from tyrannies that we created to enslave ourselves.

If honoring our fathers and mothers means accepting that they are people to whom we owe respect, consideration and a measure of care regardless of our history with them then it also means accepting that we and they are independent individuals. There is a point at which their lives and our lives have boundaries that do not overlap. Whatever we may regret from our childhood, it is our responsibility to live now so we do not pass our own injuries along and so that our regrets plague us less and less.

We can freely live the rest of our lives without being haunted either by the mistakes we now believe our parents made when raising us or by the guilt that often lasts long after an adult to child relationship should have become adult to adult. And our parents need to live without that guilt as well. . When the independence of parent from child and of child from parent is established then the days of each can be longer and happier on the earth. And children watching how their parents treat their grandparents will learn how respect links the generations by honoring both their togetherness and their separateness.

Among God's first words from out of the thundercloud are "You shall have no other gods before me" and "You shall not make for yourself an idol" In the ancient Middle East there were a multitude of gods and some goddesses, and most were approached through the worship of idols. But the Jews had already observed that many people are all too happy to use the worship of idols as an excuse to rid themselves of the burden of making the choices that free adults must make.

Looking back on the time when they had been enslaved to Egyptian idols, the Jews remembered they had been very comfortable being slaves. As slaves, they had shelter and meals and security and laws and government and a sense of identity provided for them. They missed all of that when they lived in freedom. They came to long for security, long for it enough to consider seriously giving up the freedom to shape their own lives. Even as the stone tablets were being given on Sinai the folks down below were constructing an idol to inspire them with courage, because they didn't think they could find their own courage and purpose for living.

At a deeper level the storyteller also understood that we create personal idols all the time, and then we hope that our idols will work magic to bring us happiness and security. One individual might pour his life's energies into building and furnishing a new house, believing and hoping that this house will eventually provide the comfort that is missing from his life.

Another may idolize reaching a level of personal or professional success, hoping that this recognition, once achieved, will repay the energy and the dreams that have been poured into earning it. Some parents may idolize a child – not the real child, of course, but a vision of what that child may some day accomplish and the ways in which that accomplishment will bring happiness and due reward back to his or her parents.

You shall not make for yourself an idol. This becomes a commandment not because the God in this story cannot stand some folks lighting incense in front of their home altars, but because this God who wants us to have the full blessings of freedom warns us not to give up our chance for real happiness by investing our hopes in the false security of something we create only to flatter ourselves. “You shall have no other gods before me” means taking responsibility for the person you will become. Use the freedom you have been given. Do not invest your hopes in something that will only draw you further away from the choices only you can and must make.

There is a commandment that tells us” You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord.” We know this as “Not taking the Lord's name in vain.” This is not, as most people think, merely a prohibition against saying “God damn it” when “Go'll darn it” would do. The commandment wants us to stand on our own two feet as free individuals and take

responsibility for what we believe, for what we support, for what we oppose and for the honesty of our speech without dragging in God to vouch for us.

For example when someone says, “I swear to God I’m telling the truth,” the point of the commandment is “Do not presume to know what God would or would not say about the quality of your truthfulness. Let your honesty stand on its own so that no one will ever doubt it.” Don’t drag God into your speech either to make yourself sound grander than you are by proclaiming that God blesses your particular religion or politics or by suggesting that you and God are good buddies who will never have a falling out. Don’t hide your views, your decisions, and your commitments behind God. It was not for that purpose that God promised to free you even from the slaveries you create to enslave yourself.

“Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” During the years the Hebrew people spent in slavery there was no Sabbath. Men and women worked as long as their masters wanted them to work. They were valued only because they produced what other people wanted and not because of what they thought or felt or expressed. They were not valued because they were wise or funny or creative or courageous, but because their work brought forth a product.

Now when they were released from slavery the Hebrew people asked themselves, “How will we ever know if we start slipping back into devising our own even more clever forms of personal captivity?” How will we know when we have quietly started giving back our freedoms to love the people we love and to care for other people who care for us and to serve our deepest convictions? How will we know, before it is too late, that we are no longer allowing ourselves the time to entertain dreams that matter or to raise children who will have their own dreams? How will we know when all of this begins to slip slide away from us.

From somewhere they conceived this story that even God rested after six days of work, and so who are we to think we have work that is so much more important than God’s that it demands our continual attention with no rest. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, because if you do not you will work relentlessly either to serve someone else’s needs or to appease your own personal idols. Either way you’ve lost your freedom, and shortly after losing your freedom you lose much of the pleasure you take in living. Who finally commands the time in your life if not you?

A couple of years ago while out walking I tripped and pitched forward toward the pavement. I thrust my arm out in order to stop my fall and I injured it. For a while I minimized the extent of the injury, but when the pain and the swelling would not go away I went to the doctor. When he suggested I would probably need a cast on both my hand and my arm, I balked and said that would interfere with both my driving and my ability to write – for example a sermon. He said, “It’s up to you. This is your arm. It is the only human arm God is giving you. You will not get another. You are responsible for how you take care of it.” That made an impression on me.

In presenting the Ten Commandments the God of this story is saying, “This is your life. It is the only life I am giving you. And here is your freedom. Take good care to nurture it or you will lose it. There will be many ways in which you will be tempted to ignore that freedom or even diminish the gift of life itself. There will be temptations and if you yield even to one of them you will very likely yield to more than one. Then you will unwittingly give your freedom away.

“You shall not murder, because each life is my gift to someone, which you are not entitled to take away. You shall not bear false witness against someone else, because you dishonor yourself with a lie as much as you mislead others. You shall not commit adultery, because it is a lie. It is being false to yourself as well as to others. You shall not covet or steal, because then you encroach upon the life and freedom of another individual.

We don’t really know under what actual circumstances the Ten Commandments came together into one passage. But we do know the story teller went to some lengths to be sure we understood this was an important moment. He describes the ground shaking, accompanied by thunder and lightening. And most people now assume this means that old Father God was intending to put a scare into the kids.

God, in this story, is trying to get everyone’s attention but not to scare them. God is giving permission. “I have given you life and freedom. Use it well. Do not misuse it. And respect always the life and freedom I have given to others. Do these things and you will live long and well. And that message is the value of the Ten Commandments.