

The Ten Commandments Series
“The Grace Behind the 'Thou Shalt Nots”
Sermon on Exodus 20:1-4, 7-17 with Ephesians 2:4-10 (10/11 & 10/12/14)
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Several of our members here at McCabe recently went to a church conference in the Kansas City area called Leadership Institute. Leadership Institute is a yearly event put on by the largest United Methodist church in The United States, The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection. I was unable to go with our McCabe folks this time around, but I hope we can identify a group to go next year.

Anyway, the last time I *did* go to this conference was early on in my time as pastor at Evergreen United Methodist Church in Wahpeton – and I went with several of the leaders in that congregation. We went back in the fall of 2011...and many of you here will recall all the flooding up and down the Missouri River that year.

Of course, our entire drive was on Interstate 29, much of which falls within the Missouri River valley...which meant that a lot of I-29 had been closed for quite some time leading up that fall when we made our trip to Kansas City. In fact, before we started driving, we'd heard the last stretch was *still* closed and that we'd be taking some significant detours en route.

Well, at a rest area somewhere in Iowa, a truck driver told us that I-29 had actually been opened last week and that I-29 was drivable all the way through to Kansas City. This was brilliant good news to us and we had no reason *not* to trust this random truck driver...so, when we saw signs for the official I-29 detour, we decided to just push on through – after all, the truck driver had told us it was open!

The interstate *was*, in fact, still open at the point when the detour began, so, even though the stream of vehicles in front of and behind us all got off at the detour, we kept right on going.

Everything seemed fine for about 5 miles...and then we encountered the actual road block. So we got off and decided to create our own detour that wouldn't take us quite as far away from I-29 as the official detour would have.

In the end, our unofficial detour did, in fact, save us quite a bit of time and mileage...but it was a long and winding road full of large trucks, narrow bridges and a few very nerve-racking moments – one of which included both a very large truck *and* a very narrow bridge.

(We were driving the church's minivan and I think all of us squealed with nerves in the car as we passed the very large truck on the very narrow bridge. This fiasco could have resulted in significant damage to the church's vehicle and, in the midst of it, I'm pretty sure all of us in the van were wishing we'd taken the *real* detour.)

The signs had told us to go one way, but we'd chosen to ignore the signs and go a different way. We survived the adventure, but we did learn our lesson: there are very good reasons why we are asked to follow certain directions. And that, of course, brings me to today's reading from Exodus and to the sermon series we begin today.

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For the last three months, we were in a sermon series called *Foundational Stories*, which was based on stories throughout the book of Genesis and through the first part of the book of Exodus.

In that series, we got to know the ancient Israelites – the people who had agreed to be *God's* people and to whom, in exchange for their faithfulness, God had promised three very important things: the land we call Israel, many descendants, and blessing – that they would *be* blessed and that the world would be blessed *through* them.

By the end of Genesis, the Israelites had been in Egypt for generations. They'd migrated down there from their promised land of Canaan (Israel) thanks to a severe famine. Over the course of their time in Egypt, the Israelites had become slaves to the Egyptians...and, eventually, things got so bad for them in slavery, that they cried out to God for help.

So God called Moses – himself an Israelite – to help lead them out of slavery in Egypt back to freedom in their promised land.

Getting out of Egypt was no small task: at first, the Pharaoh – the king of Egypt – wouldn't let the Israelites go...then, once they finally got out, the Egyptian army followed the Israelites in an attempt to bring them back. God helped the Israelites escape the Egyptian army by getting *them* across the Red Sea safely, while, at the same time, causing the Egyptian army to drown in it.

After they'd gotten away from the Egyptians, the Israelites found themselves wandering around in the wilderness between Egypt and Israel...not sure where to go, not sure who to trust, and not sure how to live together as a community of free people.

For so long, they'd lived under the oppressive control of Egypt. Their 40-year journey through the wilderness was a time for them to learn what it meant to be free: what it meant to be free as a community, for sure, but, most importantly, what it meant to be free as *God's* people, called to bring blessing to the world.

And, at first, the Israelites did *not* have clear road signs telling them where *to* go and where *not* to go. Well, they didn't have clear signs until Moses went up on top of a mountain for forty days and God gave him The Law.

Now, there are a couple of things for us to keep in mind as we explore the Ten Commandments over the course of the next many weeks.

The first thing I want you to remember is that The Law – the commandments – are not meant to be things we have to *do* in order to earn God's love. As we heard in our reading from Ephesians, we do not experience salvation through anything we can do...rather, we experience salvation through faith in Jesus Christ – who freely offers us love and mercy every moment of every day.

So, please keep in mind that The Law is not about earning salvation.

The other thing I want to you keep in mind is the Ten Commandments are ten of over 600 commandments God gave to Moses to then give to the Israelites. The whole of God's Law includes commandments about what to eat, what to wear, how to sell slaves, what to do when borrowing or trading livestock...and many, many other things.

So there are over 600 commandments, but the first ten hold a special place in God's law. The Ten Commandments were the first commandments given by God to the people and they have withstood the test of time in a way the others *have* not and *cannot*. We already heard them read – and we'll focus on each of them in the coming weeks – but here are The Big Ten, one more time:

One: “I am the LORD your God, the one who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” Two: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or the earth beneath or in the waters below.” Three: “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.”

Four: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.” Five: “Honor your father and your mother.”

Six: “You shall not murder.” Seven: “You shall not commit adultery.” Eight: “You shall not steal.” Nine: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” And ten: “You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

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Several years ago I saw a clip from a sketch comedy show called *Mad TV* and, any time I think about the Ten Commandments, I think of this sketch. In it, a woman goes to see a therapist she's never seen before in order to talk through some crippling fears she's been living with.

As she and the therapist sit down, the therapist first explains his billing procedure: he charges \$5 for the first five minutes of the session and, after that five minutes, there is no charge. He explains he doesn't do insurance billing and he doesn't make change: exactly \$5 by cash or check...nothing more.

(Any of us in the room who have ever seen therapists or counselors are perhaps salivating a bit at the very low-cost of this fictional therapy session...)

After the therapist explains the billing, the woman says it sounds too good to be true...and the therapist replies that he can almost guarantee she won't stay longer than the first five minutes. He then looks at his watch and says, "Aaaaaand...GO!"

The woman is a bit taken aback, but she begins to tell him about her crippling claustrophobia: she is terrified that someone is going to bury her alive in a box, so she can't go through tunnels, she is scared of elevators, etc.

The therapist asks her if anyone has ever *tried* to bury her alive in a box, the woman says, "No," and then the therapist says, "I'm going to say two words to you right now. I want you to listen to them very, very carefully. Then, I want you to take them out of the office with you and then incorporate them into your life."

She says, "Okay...," the therapist asks, "You ready?" She says, "Yes," and then the therapist leans across his desk toward her, looks her square in the face, and says, "STOP IT!" That's it. The entirety of his advice to her is that she simply *stop* being afraid of something that's never remotely happened to her.¹

Now. I do *not* mean to make light of fears like claustrophobia, and I certainly do not intend to suggest it's easy to simply *stop* experiencing anxiety if you are someone who struggles with it on an ongoing basis. I will never be one to say or believe that mental health issues or legitimate addictions just magically disappear by deciding to *stop* them.

But...for many other things, there is so much truth and wisdom in the extremely simple, yet often hard to do, advice offered in that little comedy sketch: STOP IT. And, in many ways, that is how the Ten Commandments are meant to function for us.

There have been times in my life when I have needed someone to tell me to just "stop it" when I was behaving in destructive ways or when I was focusing on things that were not worth my time and energy.

Those words - "stop it" or, "thou shalt not" - are like signs pointing us down the right path...boundaries offering us a more fulfilling option.

¹ Find a video of the sketch here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow0lr63y4Mw>

And so very often there is an abundance of grace within those kinds of boundaries. When we know what we should say “no” to, we begin to understand what we are then free to say “yes” to. And *that* is grace.

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Several years ago I reached a breaking point with my personal finances: credit card debt was mounting, I was paying-off back taxes, and I was wildly overspending my income. I was stressed and couldn't see a way out... until I “met” Christian financial guru Dave Ramsey, built my very first budget, and began to experience financial freedom.

I set boundaries around my money: I learned to say “no” to lots of things in order that I might say “yes” to others – things like becoming debt-free, lowering my stress level, being able to be more generous, saving for important purchases and having the satisfaction of paying for them in cash rather than credit. My budget has been a strict boundary, yes, but it has also been grace upon grace in my life.

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Over the next many weeks we'll look carefully at each of the Ten Commandments – these ten laws, these ten boundaries – and I want you to think and pray about how each of them offers not only a “no,” but how each of them also offers so very many “yesses.”

Next week, we'll look at the first three Commandments – having no gods before *our* God, making no idols for ourselves, and not making wrongful use of God's name. As we explore these first three commandments, we'll contemplate how amazing our God truly is and how fulfilling it can be to put God first in our thoughts and lives.

On October 25th and 26th, we'll be hitting the pause button on this series because we'll be celebrating Laity Sunday (*Laity Weekend*, really). That weekend, McCabe Church will hear from a couple of missionaries in and through the Dakotas.

We'll get back to the Ten Commandments on November 1st and 2nd when, in addition to celebrating All Saints, we'll look at Commandments four and five – keeping the Sabbath holy and honoring our parents. When we look at those commandments, we'll think critically about what it means for our primary households to be truly Godly.

On November 8th and 9th, we'll look at Commandments six, seven, eight, nine, and ten – no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, and no coveting – and we'll discover how important those laws are for living in faithful community with one another.

Then, on November 15th and 16th, we'll close this series with a reminder of God's continuing mercy even when we fall short in keeping these Commandments.

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Some of these Commandments are easier for us to keep than others and we will have to watch that we are not too judgmental of others as we explore God's Law.

We may also have to watch that we are not too hard on *ourselves* when we encounter a Commandment with which we, personally, struggle. We should feel challenged to ask for God's forgiveness and for the forgiveness of others, for sure...but this series is not meant to force us to dwell on our sins.

My hope and prayer for each of us as we focus on the Ten Commandments is that we will grow in our love of God...that we will become ever more thankful for the boundaries God blesses us with...and that we will come to understand those boundaries as grace.

For it is the grace of our God that gives us life each and every day – grace that guides us, that sustains us, and that saves us. Amen.