

“This is Us”
Exodus 20:1-17
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I've talked before about how when I first went to seminary, I was going so that I could become a youth pastor. One of the things that they do with incoming students, even before classes start, is to place them in a field education position. This means spending a few hours each week working in a local church, usually doing youth ministry, and learning from a senior pastor about all the things you're supposed to know in working for the church. For whatever reason, I couldn't find a church that seemed to fit me, or a church that liked me well enough to hire me. Then a couple of days before class started, our director of Field Education called me and said that there were still a couple of positions open as assistant chaplains at Trenton State Prison, and would I be interested? Trenton State Prison, referred to by the inmates as “The Wall,” the maximum security prison for the state of New Jersey. Did I want to spend a few hours twice a week for the next year working there? Sure, I said, why not? So, for the next nine months, every Tuesday and Wednesday, I walked through the tiers of the state prison visiting men in their cells. Some men were pretty friendly, most were polite, some wanted nothing to do with me and just said, “Pass on, preacher—just keep walking,” as I came to their cells. But I remember one guy who was always ready to talk to me. Each week that I would come by he would have something to say about a letter that he had received from his mother or from one of his daughters or wanting to talk about something in a book that he had read. But he never wanted to talk about God. Finally, after knowing him for about eight months, I stopped at this cell one day and he was just sitting on the edge of the bed. He was quiet, thinking. Eventually he said, “You know what I don't get about this God of yours. I don't get that he could ever forgive me. I've done terrible things. God won't forgive me. I will never measure up.”

Have you ever felt that way? That you just don't measure up? This morning we read from the book of Exodus about the Ten Commandments. This is the measuring stick that people have used for more than

three thousand years. Do we measure up? Have we followed the Ten Commandments? What about you? Do you measure up? This is the prescription for how people should live. This is what we need to do to be acceptable to God. How are we doing?

Have no other Gods except God. We're ok on that one, right? We don't worship Baal or Astarte or Zeus or Odin, or any of the other gods of history. We only believe in one God and worship only him. But there are those modern gods—wealth, security, recognition, nation, pleasure, group identity—those gods who require our ultimate loyalty. Any time something is more important to us than God, then we've broken this commandment.

Same is true for that idols commandment. We don't make any pictures of God that we bow down to, but anytime we put something in the place of God, we have a problem with this one.

And the third one, we're in big trouble, right? Don't take God's name in vain—how many times have you let that slip when you stub your toe or when you're mad at your kids? But that's not really what this is about. When you know someone's name, you can call them anytime you want. You can even be tempted to think that they will come anytime you call. You may even begin to think that they will do whatever you ask when you call. This is a commandment about who is in control. Is it us or is it God?

Well, how about the fourth one. Keep the sabbath day. Take one day out of seven and rest, stop working and remember who it was that made us and that we are more than what we do for a living. Not so good there either.

Number five. Honor your father and mother. My wife reminds me how long it's been since I called my mother. How about you? Whatever kind of job they did on you, they are still the only parents you have. Lose them and you lose something true about your own story.

Don't murder. Ok, here I'm ok. I haven't killed anyone. But the way the rabbis interpret this command, they affirm that we should hold all life as precious. Do we? Jesus says we shouldn't even wish harm on anyone else, even if we don't actually act against them. Did you ever wish harm to anyone? Did you even think to yourself, “Boy life would be a whole lot easier if they weren't

around?” Ok, moving on.

Don't commit adultery. Don't even want to. Don't let lust control you. If we were better at this, there wouldn't need to be a Me Too movement.

Don't take what doesn't belong to you. Be fair, even when life isn't.

Don't give your word to things you know aren't true. There is such a thing as truth, and as God's people we are supposed to believe that it is something to be treasured.

Don't resent others for having things that you don't. Learn to want what you have and pretty soon you'll have what you want.¹

Ok, so I'm not doing to well with these. How are you doing? Do you measure up? What are we going to do? Try harder, right? We need to keep these commandments because that's how we earn God's favor, that's how we get into heaven. When we die and go to see God, we will be judged on how well we measured up, how well we followed these ten commands.

Except not really. It's true that these commands are a prescription for how God wants us to act toward him and toward one another. But they are more than that. Barbara Brown Taylor says, “These are the ten rules of the covenant with Moses, ten commandments that describe a life worth living . . . “Thee is a way of life that works,” God says. “Sink these ten posts in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them, and together you may survive the wilderness. Ignore them and you flirt with your own destruction. Guard your life together. Guard your life with me. Here are ten rules that will help you do that. Please accept them as a gift from me.”

The ten commandments are not just a prescription for how to live our life, they are a description of how our life will look as God's people. An important thing to notice about the passage we read today is that Moses does not come down the mountain and say, “here's our measuring stick—this is what we have to do to please God.” Notice that God did not say, if you follow these commands, then I will deliver you out of Egypt. Let's see how you do and I'll decide. God's deliverance came first. The first words are “I

¹ Summary from *Gospel Medicine*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, pp. 47-8.

am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Because of that, this is how your life should be. This is not just a prescription, it is a description. This is the covenant that God made with the people of Israel, that he would love them and be their God and this is how their life would look—they wouldn't have any other gods, they would honor parents, they wouldn't kill or steal or covet. Grace comes first. This is a description of the covenant community.

For us too. God's grace always comes first. We don't earn his love. We can't earn his love. He loves us. Because he loves us, this is how we should act. Because he loves us, this is how it looks when we love him in return. We've talked a lot in the last couple of years about that concept of “covenant community.” God calls us into life in a covenant with him and with one another. And this is what it looks like. This is us. The covenant community that loves God and loves each other. It's that simple, and that hard. But God's love for us always comes first. And never ends.