

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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Depends on the Fourth

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Let us pray . . .

You may have seen the meme I created in yesterday's newsletter. Moses is holding up the 10 commandments thinking, "These people are driving me crazy!"

You see, by the time we get to the 10 Commandments in the Book of Exodus, God and Moses had been working very hard together. First, God helps Moses carry out the release of the Israelites from their slavery to the Egyptians by giving him instructions on what to say and what to do along the way.

Then, when they are finally free and safe from further threats from the Egyptian Army, Moses and the Israelites begin their journey into the wilderness —

and eventually find themselves lost on many levels. They're displaced, wandering and suffering. They're discouraged, hungry, and thirsty. They're scared, anxious and mad. They're cranky. They even question the Lord's presence. As a result, Moses ends up spending an awful lot of time going up and down Mount Sinai trying to sort things out.

This morning comes from the scene I mentioned several weeks back: While the Israelites were going nuts at the base of Mount Sinai, building a golden calf and losing touch with God, Moses was up the mountain receiving the 10 Commandments. Seems the people were also driving God crazy!

Which brings us to this morning's focus text. The Book of Exodus is 40 chapters long and right smack in the middle is chapter 20 where God reveals the Ten Commandments in order to make a new covenant with His people.

Because the fulfillment of the Israelites' liberation was completed in the giving of the law, they were obligated to obey in return. In agreeing to these commands, they entered the covenant with God. And the covenant

was conditional: Keep and obey the Lord's laws — receive the Lord's favor.

The placement of these commands in the center of Exodus signals their importance. As the commandments were central to the Book of Exodus, so too were these commands to be central to the Israelites' lives.

The first four commands deal with Israel's obligation to Yahweh - whose jealousy is a recurring theme in the Old or First testament: Done in the style of ancient near east royal proclamations, God starts out by making things very clear:

1. I am the Lord your God...

This was a pretty bold move on God's part because this command identifies God as the Lord of the Israelites. This command was declared at a time when there was no monotheism and the existence of other gods was not denied.

So this is Yahweh making His claim on his people.

This pronouncement claims authority and sets the tone for what is to follow.

Next God says

2. You shall have no other gods before Me.

This was commanded because many gods competed for worship, adoration, air time and so on. Remember, Yahweh is jealous, so this general ban and restriction of no other gods *before* Yahweh was exceptional.

However, not much has really changed across the millenniums, we put plenty of other gods before God and our world is a reflection of that. Our gods today are status, money, material things, comfort, the self, sports, media.

If you want to know what you worship, look at what you surround yourself with. Look at where your thoughts, your money, your time and your relationships are spent.

Now the 3rd commandment says:

3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

The reference to “in vain” reads more accurately if you think “falsely” or “casually.” False or frivolous oaths were considered an affront to God. Today, we should seriously consider this command because otherwise, we align and attribute all acts — from foulness to violence — to the name of God. From swearing in anger to declaring God’s name as a bomb goes off.

So this command is given to keep what is Holy, holy and to be clear on the separation of what God intends, as distinct from what we might declare wicked or evil in the name of God.

And the 4th and final command regarding obligations to God says:

4. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

The word Sabbath has its origins in a Hebrew word meaning “to rest.” We recognize this command to rest from the story in Genesis where God created the heavens and the earth and every living creature in six days, and on the seventh, God rested.

While the custom of sabbath-taking is unknown, it became a distinctive characteristic of Judaism, and as such was a source of mockery to pagans in antiquity as it was viewed as laziness.

Its point was to be Holy like God and essentially had a two-fold purpose:

To observe the act of God’s creation of the world while at the same time enjoying a liberation from labor — including all those who work for you.

The remaining 6 commandments are concerned with how we relate to each other:

5. Honor your father and your mother...

With roots in near eastern wisdom literature, including the book of Proverbs, this commandment signals the switch from honoring God to honoring human beings, beginning with the pair through whom each of us comes into the world. This is also the only commandment in which no or not does not appear. The ancient Rabbis said this command appears on the same tablet that is set aside for commandments between humanity and God because, just like God, our parents shared in creating us.

If your relationship with your parent or parents is or was strong, this is an easy command. However, honoring them can be difficult to follow if your relationship with one or both of your parents has been abusive. Maybe the place to start is with gratitude for your being.

The 6th command tells us not to murder.

The Hebrew verb *ratsah means* “murder” not “kill” and is specifically a ban on criminal acts that take a life. The effect of this law was not to prevent all killing, but to regulate the taking of life and to make it subject to community control.

The 7th command tells us:

No adultery

This command was concerned with sexual violations of marriage. Polygamy was permitted in ancient Israel with Solomon being one of its most famous practitioners. Either men or women could be guilty of adultery, but a man offended the husband of his partner. And a woman offended against her own husband.

Rabbi Benjamin Blech writes that there was a time when people understood that true love was a necessary prerequisite for intimacy and that *kiddushin*, the Hebrew word for marriage as holiness, was the ideal way to describe the perfect union between two people who love each other.

Blech says that from casual sex and hookups, to adulterous unions, contemporary America has traded the seventh commandment for a lack of sexual restraint and immorality – and since everything has a consequence, the fallout is often broken homes, unfulfilled fantasies and grief.

Next, number 8 tells us You shall not steal

While this is a general command, Rabbi Blech says that for the study of the Jewish texts, theft means far more than the taking of someone else's property. We steal from others whenever we don't live up to our obligations, whenever we do not give full value for any work for which we receive payment. The point being, if we're not conscientious enough to fulfill an obligation to the best of our ability, we are in violation of the eighth commandment.

Commandment 9: You shall not bear false witness

This law was based on the importance of truth in witnessing as illustrated by cases where someone was put to death on the basis of a false witness.

Today, Rabbi Blech reminds us that words matter. They can heal but they can also kill. This commandment goes far beyond testimony given in a courtroom. Our use of words on a daily basis by way of harmful speech, spiteful slander, malicious rumors and hurtful gossip can destroy reputations, and kill friendships. They can hurt the victims of their cruel barbs in excruciating ways. How many times have we heard of a youngster driven to suicide over cruel words on social media?

Blech reminds us that gossip is no less than social sewage for the ears. Yet our culture today makes it the major focus of our media and a constant theme of our conversations. For the Torah, careless talk was

more than sin; it was sickness – a disease similar to leprosy that required those guilty of slander to be dealt with by isolation.

And finally, the 10th commandment. You shall not covet.

Commentators explain that just as the first law — I am the Lord your God — is central to all the other laws, this last commandment is meant to bring us to the highest level of holiness. It demands not only that we control our actions and our speech, but even our thoughts. It addresses a universal human failing and obviously believes that we can overcome it.

As Rabbi Blech writes, if the desire for something is based on need, then fulfillment brings contentment. If the goal, however, is simply to have more than everyone else, then we are doomed to disappointment and endless dissatisfaction. There's always somebody who has something we don't — which is enough to stir up within us envy to prevent us from being content with what is ours. That's why coveting consumes us. In the most profound sense, those who covet fail to acknowledge the powerful truth that there is enough in this world to satisfy everyone's need but there's never enough to satisfy people's greed. And it's that greed that creates the imbalances.

That's a the quick and dirty on the 10 commandments, and when we don't follow them there are consequences. The consequences might be emptiness, isolation, fear, anxiety, indifference, anything that keeps us small, separates us from God and keeps us from being who we are in God.

So how do we stay on track with them? While it might be easy to agree to not kill someone, some of the others might get a little blurry — like worshipping other Gods, using our words carelessly or coveting.

I think the key to staying on track with God's commandments begins at the end of verse 18 and goes through verse 19: *So They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."*

Do not have God speak to us or we will die.

In a sense these words are true, for if we let God speak to us and we listen and obey, we will die — we'll die to our own willfulness or old self and old ways. In turn, we might find ourselves shifting and no longer staying at a distance but moving closer to God.

And I think the key to letting God speak to us lies in command 4 — Thou shalt take a sabbath — it's like the hinge pin between our obligations to God and our obligations to each other.

The intent of taking a sabbath was ultimately to remember Yahweh. As stated earlier, a sabbath was to observe the act of God's creation of the world while at the same time enjoying a liberation from labor — through remembering being freed from slavery. In taking a sabbath we are also invited to be Holy like God.

In the ancient near east this command was for simpler times. But today, with all the ways we are plugged in and the speed at which we can zoom around, it seems now more than ever we need to stop and be still on a regular basis, that also means taking a rest from consuming, competing, producing, constantly moving.

And what work stoppage does is tend to a space inside for stillness and quiet because it is in this space that we can hear God's voice above all the others. It is in this space that we can know that God is God and circle back to the beginning and fall into God's bold opening command, I am God and I am yours.

And it is in this space where we can listen for what we are to do when we are troubled or burdened. Just as God gave Moses the tools he needed to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, so too does God give you the

tools to help lead you out of your own places of lostness. So when the world or your own impulses and choices might drive you crazy, first make sure you believe and feel it when God says I am God and I am yours, and then check to make sure you are taking a regular sabbath — a time and place to rest in the things of a God who loves you more than words can say.