

Turning the Tables
Jubilee Mennonite Church
March 4, 2018

Purpose: To hold the honest tensions between God's love and God's judgement, inviting ourselves to hold both together.

Message: The Good News of the kingdom is that we are invited into dynamic relationship with the God who covenants with us in life and living.

Scriptures:	<i>Old Testament</i>	Exodus 20:1–17 [I will read]
	<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 19
	<i>New Testament</i>	1 Corinthians 1:18–25 [Please read/have read]
	<i>Gospel</i>	John 2:13–22

Synopsis: We readily feel the tensions between law and grace. In our minds, if we are free and under grace, then rules should not, ideally, apply to us. We might even go so far as to think that if we are loved, then rules should never be put in place. On the other hand, we also carry the inclination to understand the relationship between us and God as one where God commands and we are bound to obey or else. We live the life of covenant as a threat to ourselves. How might we come to understand the gifting of the law in a way that reminds us of the relationship we have with God that far exceeds our notion of law?

Notes:

[Third Sunday in Lent for Year B \(March 8, 2015\)](#)

[The Most Important Command in the Old Testament isn't what you think](#)

[God Beyond All Relationships and Agendas: Exodus 24:12-18](#)

[Sermon Seeds March 4, 2018](#)

[Piety without pretense, Faith without Falsehood: The Lenten Journey According to John](#)

[Righteous Anger Gods Politics 3 John 2 13-21 10-21-2012.docx](#)

Exodus 20:1–17

20 Then YHWH spoke all these words:

² I am the LORD your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery;
³ you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol,
whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above,
or that is on the earth beneath,
or that is in the water under the earth.

⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them;
for I the LORD your God am a jealous God,
punishing children for the iniquity of parents,
to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,
⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation
of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of YHWH your God,
for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God;
you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter,
your male or female slave,
your livestock,
or the alien resident in your towns.

¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
but rested the seventh day;
therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹² Honor your father and your mother,
so that your days may be long in the land
that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ You shall not murder.

¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ You shall not steal.

¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house;

you shall not covet your neighbor's wife,
or male or female slave,

or ox, or donkey,
or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

These words are important. We know that they are because they are generally voiced with the deep booming Charleton Hesston voice over that tells us that they are. They are chiseled in stone to remind us of the importance of law, providing the court house a cornerstone on which to stand. These commandments have a life of their own in our civic life. This is the world of law and order, police and judges. These are the basic decencies of life together. Do not Murder (or kill depending on your translation's origins), do not lie, steal, commit adultery, be jealous of the stuff other people have. These are fairly basic rules for the fundamental playground of the world out of which most other more specific insinuations flow. Basic decency demands it.

Beyond our civic selves, these commands also have a life in our theological imagination. They set the stage for what it means to be a person of faith, establishing the basics of how to be a reverent follower of the living God. Here the purpose of the law, God's law, is as a penetrating light. According to the early reformers, the whole point of the law starting here and proceeding through the entire law of Moses was to reveal exactly how far there is to travel from where we are to where God wants us to be and how rather impossible it is to get there. We have the law; these commandments, the stuff of the Old Testament on one hand, and the Gospel—the cure to the law—on the other. Like matter and anti matter, they are not to mix, and when they do, the results are downright explosive. The Law shows us the sin; the Gospel shows us how to fix the sin. To be sure, this is getting rather Lutheran in here, but in the fundamentals we are no different. Anabaptists wouldn't go to quite these extremes, but the fundamental assumptions are that these are the ways that the world works.

In either case, there is not a whole lot of joy here. I don't know about you, but Exodus 20 is not where I turn to get comfort or to connect to the sense of the holy. We may well have memorized these laws as children, often distilling the broader contexts down to their basic points, but the 10 commandments are not a really a part of the life that we live, or the faith that we lead. We know that they are there, and we are as mindful as may be not to cross the line—civically or theologically—to get us into trouble with these notions. But these words are just that—the words that form the foundational notions of our social and spiritual contract

with a God who wants to keep us in line and out of trouble. Seldom do we hear them as good news.

I think it is because we distill the passage down to its basics, and forget how these words must have sounded to those who first heard them. It might be hard to consider, because we so often divorce the commands from what is going on around them. Moses has led Israel into the desert, across the Red Sea, and is now in charge of building a society there. And while there might be all sorts of details to be managed around Manna, the following of YHWH, the collection of water, and all the rest, there is one obvious thing that is going to be different from here on in: they are going to be free. Israel is now free after generations of slavery and the compromises that go with it. And from here on in life was going to change because YHWH God, the one who accomplished their liberation has brought them out of Slavery. We disregard the opening comments here—"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, the Land of Slavery"—as a needless embellishment that can easily be ignored. But time and again throughout the law, there is this fundamental rationale—this is who you are to be and how you are to be because you are not a slave, but once you were. Don't forget this. You are now a people of YHWH God, freed from what has been to now embody what can be.

Think about it. How would newly freed slaves hear these words? What if "You Shall Not" is not merely a command, but also a promise? A promise that the world would never return to what had been? I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (therefore) you shall have no other gods before me. *You will not have to bow down before your master's gods, you will be free to worship your own god.* I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (therefore) you shall not murder, *you shall not be required to kill whomever the master says to kill.* I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (therefore) you shall not commit adultery, *you will not be compelled to act like breed-stock, producing more slaves for the master. Instead you will be free to marry and raise families.* I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (therefore) you shall not

*steal, no longer will you be pillage and loot under orders and against your own will, or to make up for what has been taken from you.*¹

Doesn't this law sound a whole lot like Good News, like Gospel? What might they be saying to us to liberate us to today? "I am the Lord God who is the provider of all that you could ever need, ever want. Life must be more than work. Therefore, even though it makes you nervous, you must take a day off regularly to be who I created you to be." Or "I am the God of all things and all times, and I have freed you from life as usual. All that would ask for your attention and allegiance above me you should avoid. You need not make an idol of the ways of the world, or the leaders of the world, and their petulant demands for praise and glory. There is one saving God, and none of them are it." Or even "I have freed you from the slavery of possession and material goods. You do not need to keep up with the Jones' anymore". At the end of the day, the systems that keep us enslaved to the ways and means of our world, and worries that they carry are very much alive and kicking. I am in just as much need to hear these liberating words as the next guy, if not more so. We all need to hear God's freeing law and gracious hope within it. We need the law to convict us, to remind us of who we are to be and how we are to conduct ourselves. Yet we should never divorce the law—any of the law—from the context of liberation and hope it is meant to serve. The memory of who they were in Egypt is given to Israel as a keep sake of sorts, calling them again and again to gracious and generous living throughout the Old Testament. Jesus picks up on this confluence of grace and law when he in the Sermon on the Mount expands on these principles, calling those who would follow after him to obey not just the letter of the law but the spirit of grace that contains it.

We are drawn time and again into relationship with the living God. The law is part of God loving us way too much to ever let us stay the way we are. It is part of God's invitation to life as it should be—full and free of the anxious what ifs of today, planning for tomorrow. This is part of God's loving covenant with us—that all will be well with you if you would have the grace to remember who you are—the created, broken people who seek me in such

¹ Drawn from a sermon by by the Rev. Dr. Delmer L. Chilton found at lectionary lab (<https://lectionarylab.com/2015/03/02/third-sunday-in-lent-for-year-b-march-8-2015/>)

messy ways—and the ability to welcome the way of the kingdom with fresh ears, knowing that the law was never meant to enslave us to its demands. It was meant to liberate us to know God’s full life deeply, richly, graciously, fully, and forever more.

May we know this good news deep within us, now and always. Amen.