

The Law of the Land

Exodus 19: 1-6; Exodus 20: 1-2

19 On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ² They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. ³ Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴ You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶ but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

20 Then God 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;

We are beginning a new sermon series today based on the Ten Commandments. Given everything going on in our nation and our world right now, this topic could be seen as out of touch with the current context or maybe even a little tone deaf to the larger narrative of hurt and brokenness which fills our every day lives. Yet, in reality, now is the perfect time for us to talk about the Ten Commandments because the Ten Commandments have never been about us as individuals. They have always been about us as a community. They have always been about being in relationship with others. They have always been about loving our neighbors as ourselves.

You see, as the people of God, the Ten Commandments are at the heart of our beliefs when we practice what we preach. They are the force which shapes our understanding of what social justice looks like when it is truly lived out so that all are embraced as Beloved Children of God. The Ten Commandments are the very foundation of our faith. So now, when everything seems upside down, and there is so much hurt, now is the perfect time for us to go back and reflect, to go back and remember, to go back and reclaim how these defining statements call us to live as people who work to bring about healing and wholeness for all of God's people so that the Kingdom of God is here on Earth as it is in Heaven. Or as one of my seminary professors used to say...if we are really wondering what's behind these statements which are the law of the land, all we have to do is realize that they prevent us from living backwards because when we act out and live backwards, we get the word evil.

That begin said, before we begin in this series, I want us to take a few moments and name what the Ten Commandments are not. They are not ways to control us. They are not ways for us to get into heaven. They are not ways to make us more pious than others. As I said earlier, The Ten Commandments have always been about our neighbors, about community, about creating justice and equality for all of God's people.

And when we look at our text for today, we can see this very clearly.

Because the Ten Commandments do not stand alone. They are a part of the larger narrative which tells the story of God's covenantal relationship with God's people.

In our text, we are told that God brought the people out of Egypt and lead them to Mount Sinai. God reminds the people of all that God has done, helping them cross the Red Sea, providing for all their needs. God bore them as if on eagle's wings, bringing them safely this far. The people have experienced God's steadfast love. They have experienced God's endless faithfulness. The people know that God will never abandon them. And now, God is inviting them to be in relationship with God.

This is significant because this is a change in the people's identity. Before when they lived in captivity, they lived under someone else's rules and regulations. Now, God has brought the people out of slavery. God has freed them. They have a new identity. Now they have a new name. Now they have a new purpose. Now they have a new way to be in relationship with one another, a way which is not grounded in power and might but rather grounded in love and grace.

It is only after the relationship, it is only after the covenant, it is only after the pledge to live in community is established are the Ten Commandments even mentioned. For God, and for us, relationship comes before the Law. Community

comes before the rules and regulations. Connection comes before the ethical claims on our behavior.

From the very beginning, God has always, always wanted to be in relationship with God's people. Any other way of viewing this does not allow God to be the God we know have and have experienced in our lives...a God of grace, a God of love, a God who is faithful from one generation to the next.

For God and for us as the people of God, relationship always comes before the Law. Even in the New Testament, Jesus explains this when he is asked what the Greatest commandment is. Jesus tells the young man that it is to Love our God with all our heart, mind and strength And to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Later in the Epistles, Paul continues this line of understanding when he says we are freed in Christ. He wants early Christians to know that our relationship with Jesus changes who we are. No longer are we tied to the false narrative that it is all about me and my wants. Our experience with the Risen Savior changes us. It transforms us. It opens our hearts to the Kingdom of God in our midst.

As ones who know that death and darkness do not have the last word, we are called to celebrate this new life freely given to us by sharing this same love shown to us with others.

Please hear me say that this call to be in relationship with others is not fulfilled by having some warm and cozy feelings for the people who simply live

next door to us. Being in relationship, being in community is the down and dirty, hard work of reconciliation and peace-making. It is about making justice for the least of these. It is about naming and yes working to dismantle oppressive systems which continue to separate and divide our world. It is about caring for people, and not just those who look like or think like us.

Being in relationship is about becoming the people God created us and calls us to be. From the very first moment when God claimed us as God's own, from the moment God gave us the Ten Commandments to show us what life freed through grace and love looks like, from the very first moment Jesus told us that the law of the land could be summed up as "To Love our God with all our hearts, minds strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, as people of faith, our understanding of community was transformed because we realized that the Kingdom of God was never about us as individuals, that it has always been about us, all of us, all of God's people becoming the Beloved Community.

It is my hope and my prayer that as we make our way over the next few weeks, taking a more in depth look at the Ten Commandments, we realize that these statements were never ever supposed to be simply plaques that we put on our wall, allowing them to gather dust. Rather instead, these statements which are the law of the land were always meant to bring new life and to inspire hope for social change. May it be so. Amen.