

SERMON: Thou Shalt Love

TEXT: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-17

“Question Authority.” This was the simple statement on a button my teenage sister had on the bulletin board in her bedroom. I was nine years her junior, so it took me a long time to understand what that meant. *Question authority*. Did it mean that we should ask questions of those in authority because of their experience and wisdom? Did it mean that we could trust authority figures and learn from them? Well, I eventually figured out that – at least as far as my sister was concerned – in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, “*question authority*” was a statement of protest and resistance. It meant that we should **not** automatically trust those in positions of authority, because they might not be wise at all. *Question Authority* meant that we should be careful about whom we follow and what we believe.

Even though I am a rule-follower by nature, I blame my hippie sister for the fact that I’ve never been very excited about

the Ten Commandments. It's not that I disagree with them; they all make good sense. Furthermore, I certainly don't question God's authority. I trust God. You know, except in those moments when I'm tempted to follow an easier path.

Perhaps I should really blame King James for my difficulty with the Ten Commandments. All those "thou shalt not's" are really not very inspiring or motivational are they? The tone of the message in the King James version of the Bible makes it sound harsh and restrictive. Psychology would tell us that we are most tempted to rebel when we're told what *not* to do. So, I began to wonder how to reframe and restate these restrictive, negative messages into something more inspiring and positive.

Then I found a book titled, *No Other Gods*, by contemporary theologian Ana Levy-Lyons. While staying true to the Biblical and historical context, she also explains the commandments in terms of Jewish belief and tradition. She emphasizes the freedom and

blessing God gives through the commandments, rather than the idea that we are bound to obedience in these stone-carved words. Much of what I share with you today comes from her book, to the extent that I feel compelled to retitl the sermon, "No Other Gods."

Commandment Number One: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."* Throughout her book, Ana Levy-Lyons refers to the God of the Old Testament as YHVH. In Sunday School, you may have learned to refer to God as Yahweh. But she explains that "in Jewish tradition its pronunciation is not meant to be even attempted. Even the consonants *y*, *h*, and *v* are open sounds, associated with air and breath, not definition or finality. YHVH is considered the most sacred name of God - unpronounceable because it stands for something unfathomable."

More than just a commandment, this first of ten “things” (as they are referred to in Jewish tradition) is a blessing. “May you be free from the painful voices of your past... free from the poverty inflicted by an unjust society...free from loneliness...free from all that enslaves you...” Often the other gods that we choose will make demands on our time, our money, our energy, to the point that we become captive to them. But when we live the truth that there is but one true God, we find freedom. “May you have no other gods besides YHVH.”

Commandment Number Two: *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.* “Accept no substitutes for God’s power of liberation.” We all know that sometimes we fall in love with people or things, and sometimes we worship them, and sometimes we even begin to believe that those people or things can validate us or save us. “We squander so much of our own life force trying to

become something other than what we are. We try so hard to achieve in so many arenas – to have the right kind of body, the right kind of job, the right kind of friends, the right kind of family, the right kind of kids in the right kind of neighborhood.... All the true power that we have in this world comes from our connection to our most authentic selves.... The more 'like ourselves' we are, the deeper our experience of life and relationships. It is the height of personal liberation when we can accept no substitutes and no simulations."

Commandment Number Three: *You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.* "We are called to recognize the power of language in this teaching. What we say matters; and it matters whether it's true, particularly when it comes to talking about God and ultimate reality.... This third commandment is about God's reputation.... When God's reputation as a good and loving and just God gets tarnished... *people lose faith*. Faith gets

injured when public figures use the concept of God opportunistically to justify evil acts." One example is the child sex abuse scandals of the Catholic Church. "That the abuse was so pervasive and systematically concealed was soul crushing to Catholics around the world... alienating believers not just from the religious institution, but from God."

Human beings are responsible for the cold, cruel world; God did not create the world as it is. "The third commandment blesses the positive practice of claiming a vision of a loving, accepting, and forgiving God and a world that was inherently good from its inception and remains so.... By keeping the third commandment to protect the holiness of reality, we would spread joy, not mistrust; safety, not peril. We would care for one another in this way – giving hope where hope is often hard to find."

Commandment Number Four: *Remember the Sabbath day,*

and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

“The fourth commandment enjoins us to keep a Sabbath for *being* itself – our own inner being, cosmic being, the state of being. We reserve one day out of seven to simply be.... Sabbath forces us to confront the question, *To whom or to what do I ultimately belong?* As we become more and more able to answer, ‘I belong to YHVH’ or ‘to my deepest self’ or ‘to the world community’ or ‘to the earth,’ we grow in spiritual strength.”

Commandment Number Five: *Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.* This one causes many of us difficulty, as we all can attest to the complicated nature of parent-child relationships. “This commandment appears in the first half of the commandments, the half that generally has to do with our relationship with God, rather than where one might expect it to be, in the second half, which pertains to our relationships with humans. In Jewish tradition, the honoring of parents and the

honoring of God are closely intertwined. They are spiritual practices of honoring our Source in all its many forms.”

“The fifth commandment calls us to cultivate the very un-American quality of humility. It asks us to acknowledge that we are not self-made. We are products of all that came before us, including the flawed love of our parents, the successes and failures of our ancestors, the teachers of all kinds who have shaped us throughout our lives. Our parents are a vital piece of who we are today, in both good and bad ways.... Honor all of that which has made you *you*.”

Numbers Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine: *You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.* Levy-Lyons does not combine these as I am doing, but devotes a full chapter to each one in her book. But none of us wants to be here that long. Suffice it to say, however, that all four of these commandments have one thing in common: they take life rather than give life.

“*Do not kill*” at its simplest is a call for world peace: a call for each of us to protect, honor, and serve all the creatures of the earth.”

Do not commit adultery. Adultery destroys trust. “Conversely, when people trust one another and feel fundamentally safe, we are much better able to access our own compassion for others.... We naturally create a culture based on love.”

Do not steal. “Instead of trying to take as much as we can from the systems around us, keeping [this] commandment means putting as much as we can into those systems.”

Do not testify against your neighbor. This commandment is about truth-telling. “Honesty is part of the glue that holds the fabric of a community together.”

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. “We all covet. We all crave things that we don’t have, shouldn’t have, don’t need, and sometimes that belong to someone else.” We need to cultivate

gratitude and a sense of knowing that we have enough and we are enough.

“The commandments, like a sleeve inverting itself, transform into blessings:

May you be blessed with power directly... from the Source of life and liberation; may it, and nothing else, guide you.

May you be blessed with authenticity; may you be able to discern the real from the simulation.

May you be blessed with innocence; may you always speak the goodness of life and break free from cynicism.

May you be blessed with peace; may you luxuriate in sacred time and space every week.

May you be blessed with humility; may you honor your Source in all its forms.

May you be blessed with compassion; may you be a life-sustaining force for all the creatures of the earth.

May you be blessed with love; may you repair what is broken and cherish what is imperfect.

May you be blessed with abundance; may you never need to take what is not yours.

May you be blessed with honesty; may you be a conduit for the voices of truth in your world.

May you be blessed with enough; may you always be filled with the freedom, joy, and dignity of YHVH.”

To the glory of God!

AMEN.