

**“IS THAT ALL GOD WANTS?”**  
**Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; John 2:13-22; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25**  
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**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**  
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Three months it had been. Three months that began with a rain of plagues on the house of the Egyptians and got serious when a people, in utter desperation to cast off their slavery, stepped out between the parted waters of the Red Sea. Three months of wandering where they had never been, living on manna, on water struck from rocks, following the man Moses from this place to that. They were unable to go back now; and they didn't know where or how to look forward. Sore of foot, exhausted of spirit, the people of Israel rested finally, camped in the wilderness of Sinai, right at the base of the mountain. And they wondered. They wondered about their future; they wondered about their safety. They wondered mostly about this God, this little known deity with whom they had so completely thrown in their lot. This God had brought them out of Egypt. Now what? What would the God want in return? What would the God demand from them? What was to be the price of their freedom?

*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.  
You shall not make for yourselves idols.  
You shall not make wrongful use of my name.  
You shall remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy.  
You shall honor your father and your mother.  
You shall not murder.  
You shall not commit adultery.  
You shall not steal.  
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.  
You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

That's all? The people gasped. That's all the God wants? The people were prepared to give up their crops, their animals, their maiden daughters, their children. If they had to, they would perform ritual after ritual of inflating and appeasing. Gods in the people's experience were like spoiled children with great power. You had to be careful with them for you had no choice. You had to do whatever they said or life would go awry. So what if their demands were absurd, humiliating, terrifying. You had no choice.

But this God, this God who had brought them out of Egypt, when Moses brought back the word of God to the people, the word we call the ten commandments, the people were stunned. Ten requirements. Just ten. Three of them have to do with the terms of respect for God. The fourth talks about honoring God with rest. Rest? That was a new concept to a people enslaved for generations. The other six speak of a code of ethics, of a way of conduct, that lays the basis for civil community: honesty, loyalty, a turning away from greed, avarice, and violence.

Is that all? At this point in the story, we are supposed to imagine the people of Israel

open-mouthed in wonder at what they had heard. You have to hear this story told around a thousand campfires, know the people's surprise, their wary delight, their astonishment at the miraculous self-disclosure of their God. Ten commandments, commandments that made life better, requirements easy to understand and to follow. What we hear as absolute rules, as prescriptions, as "thou shalt not..." those frightened and weary refugees heard as gift, as blessing, as unimaginable good fortune. If these things were what this God wanted, then this was a God who could be trusted rather than feared. This was a God who could be counted on rather than appeased. This was a God, obedience to whom would cause to grow all the gifts of community, of stability, of the possibility of life. It was an unimaginable blessing.

We 21st century liberal Christians, we tend to be wary of commandments set in stone. I was talking with Ryan about it earlier this week, and he, with a positive spin on our reluctance, he offered that we look at the social and political climate of our age, and we wonder if segments of our society have made idols of the ten commandments, wanting all—far and near— to bow down and worship them; and that's what makes us uncomfortable. I think there's a lot of truth in Ryan's analysis. When we think of the Ten Commandments, we think of them allied with those whose minds are cast in sharp edges of stone, in black and white, and in and out—no nuance, no diversity. Just the rigidity of stone tablets. We don't want to go there theologically, politically, socially, and with good reason. So we turn away.

But I also think, if we are honest, that we balk at the Ten Commandments, or any commandments, because we just don't like anyone, even God, setting limits on our freedom. It's not that we actively want to murder or steal or commit adultery, but we'd like to keep our options open for the future. There are those liberal Christians who think we should maybe call them the ten suggestions. . .

When I was a child growing up in the church, you got a little prize for memorizing the Ten Commandments. Any of the rest of you get those prizes? Now we'd never think of encouraging our children to memorize God's commandments, even as we chafe at them ourselves. And I think that is sad; we have lost something special here. With our qualms and our sensitivities, we have totally lost our sense of God's law, God's requirements of us as holy—in the best sense of that word. Holy: because they show us the grace and love of God. Holy: because they lead our lives into the safe and secure places where growth and intimacy can occur.

There is a difference between chaos and freedom. When God leads the people in the Exodus out from slavery, the giving of the Law is the final act of that leading out, because to live without the boundaries of civility is only another kind of enslavement: enslavement to arbitrary power, enslavement to impulse, enslavement to what is worst in ourselves. Walter Bruggeman, a United Church of Christ theologian, reminds us that the power and distinctiveness of Israel's God is the assertion that "there is no holiness without justice." There is no holiness without justice, and that justice requires the strongest possible statements about the difference between right and wrong.

The campfires of the Exodus people are far from us: far in time and in experience. We have been brought up in the theological luxury of just assuming—just taking for granted—that the divine will

is one that is bent towards goodness, justice, life that is whole, free, bounded by the requirements that allow the possibility of love, community, and a generous faith. We shouldn't take it for granted. God's law is for us, as for those of old, a gift; and its giving not only set us free but reveals for us for all time the graciousness of the God we serve.

So hear these commandments again.

*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.*

*You shall not make for yourselves idols.*

*You shall not make wrongful use of my name.*

*You shall remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy.*

*You shall honor your father and your mother.*

*You shall not murder.*

*You shall not commit adultery.*

*You shall not steal.*

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

*You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

Can you think of them differently? Can you see them for the gracious possibility they contain? Can you see them as the boundaries that teach us of holiness and justice, wholeness and peace. These are what our God wants from us and for us. Like the Israelites of old, let us bow our heads in wonder, and let us give thanks. Amen.