

Exodus 19:3-7, 20:1-17 Sermon

We all know the 10 commandments. We may not be able to list them accurately, but we know them. We talked about them here last spring. We did three weeks on this 19th and 20th chapter in the book of Exodus. That's where we find the most popular version of the commandments. I'll admit that I borrowed a bit from each of those sermons. But I have a bit more nuance for you today. Are you ready?

[Pray with me]

Moses led the children of Israel out of captivity in Egypt. Now they were wandering around in the wilderness with no place to call home. If you remember... these people had spent the last 400 or so years living in one place. Perhaps it wasn't their place... not their home, but people... we have a way of making do with what we're given. We find a way to make it work for us... most of the time. May not be what we wanted but we figure out how to make do. So even though they were slaves in Egypt, Egypt was familiar. It was predictable. They understood how things worked. They KNEW Egypt.

Sometimes the hardest thing you can try to get people to do is change from something familiar. Even if they don't like the place or the situation they're in, it's a struggle to get them to change. That's what confronted Moses. He led his people out of captivity and into the wilderness. And they weren't happy. Not after being out there for a minute. Not when they realized how uncomfortable it was being on their own and not having the infrastructure of the Egyptians to support their living. Having to fend for themselves. And like we tend to do when we are uncomfortable... they murmured and complained.

I think Moses, as their leader, saw what was happening to his people and realized that one of the problems was they weren't sure what the rules were. They didn't know what proper behavior was. And every society needs rules. I know some of us hate rules. I'm not a fan either. But I'm sorry. I just don't see how it can work any other way. We need rules. We need boundaries set. Even if they are loosely set... we need them. That's just the way things are. You don't have to take my word on it. But I know I'm right. You get a group of people together trying to exist as a community... you are going to need to set and agree upon some norms.

The key is trying to keep your rules fair and just. They knew the rules they were under in Egypt. Even though there were things in the Egyptian rules that didn't work for the children of Israel... rules that favored the Egyptians. That's the way it usually works, by the way. The dominant group sets the rules and everybody else must live within them. And the rules are almost ALWAYS going to support making things easier for the dominant peoples and keep them in power. Remember that. Because much of the fighting that is happening in this country is over the interpretation and intention of the rules. Who gets to make them... and who gets to enforce them. Old rules and new ones that are introduced to refine or reject the old ones. It's a mess!

Moses was a good leader. He saw the people were struggling with this new freedom. They needed order. They needed a new set of boundaries... a new set of norms... a new set of shared guidelines. They needed a law. So he climbed Mount Sinai to come up with something. And he came back with these 10.

Whenever I think of this scene I recall how it was shown in a Mel Brooks movie. Moses comes down with three tablets and says, "God has given me these 15..." and just as he says 15 he drops one of the awkwardly held tablets. He watches it shatter into little pieces and continues, "these 10 Commandments..."

But there is something very different about these commandments. In fact, calling them 'commandments' does them a disservice. They really aren't a set of rules. Not like you think of when you think of rules. The 10 so-called Commandments are more like a recipe. They're not a set of guidelines on how each of us as individuals are to behave. These are a guide to being in community. See humans were not built to be independent standalone units. We are relational beings. We need each other to survive. And this set of rules given to Moses are for helping us live and thrive together in community.

Now... I believe the enemy of community is selfishness. Not self-interest. I mean you gotta be getting something out of it if you're going to do it. I encourage you to understand and seek after your self-interests. Here I'm talking about when you take it too far. When nothing else matters but you. And you are willing to do anything to satisfy your hungers. When it becomes

all about us... when our needs are more important than anyone else's... when our focus becomes solely on ourselves... that's when we become dangerous to the community. That's when society starts to fail.

But suppose our focus was not on ourselves but on God? I mean think about it... what is God? God is love. Right? So what if our focus was on love? The commandments are commanding us to keep our focus on love.

Do everything we do remembering love.

Don't put anything before love.

Don't invent fake love.

Don't try to define or refine it into any particular form or fashion.

Don't place limits on love.

Don't reject love.

Don't act without it. Because your loveless actions will cause damage that will last for generations. I know some might see that as a threat. But it's not a threat. It's a proven truth. When you act out of something other than love... when you refuse to accept love... there is usually damage. And it's a level of damage that requires years to repair... if ever. Left untreated, it is often passed on from generation to generation. A child from an abusive home is likely to be abusive. The family of a person who causes shame and disruption to the community often finds themselves ostracized as well.

But you can interrupt that cycle. It doesn't have to be that way. Not if you follow these guidelines. Not if you cook up your community using this recipe.

Keep your focus on love. Do that always and it will make you behave in a certain way. It will make your efforts be for the greater good and not your selfish desires. It's about the community. When there is love the community thrives and everyone can be satisfied... even if they don't have anyplace of their own to call home. Most rules are made to control a behavior but not the 10 commandments. No... they give us a way to live together in community. They give us a few guidelines on how to love and be loved.

But this is more than a story about rules. This story is about God and God's relationship with the Hebrew people. A people who had spent the last 400 years or so in slavery. That long in captivity had to have some impact on the minds of the Hebrew people. At the very least they had to suffer from a low self-esteem. And even though they had been freed from their captivity they'd been out there for 3 months. Wandering from place to place. No place to settle. No place to call home. I can imagine the dejectedness the people of Israel must've felt. Even though they just experienced an obvious miracle, they had to feel some kind of way about things. The possession of land was really important to the people back then. It meant you had a base... a place that was yours. But the Jews had nothing like that. They were free but free to what end? Free for what purpose?

The story says God saw what was happening to the spirit of the people. They needed something to lift them up. And what would lift you up more than being informed that you are special? That you are a chosen people?

Think about it. For most of your life you've been told that you are nothing. Treated like you are nothing. That your lives don't matter. Oh sure, they may say you're important and they care, but all of the empirical evidence suggests otherwise.

Let me give you an example. Let's look at black people in this country. A small fraction of the people in the nation but the largest percentage of almost all the negative things you can measure. Largest ethnicity in prisons.

Largest school dropout rate.

Most families living in poverty.

Highest in all the wrong places. Which for many, makes them the lowest of all peoples. And that can't help but affect their sense of self worth. If the world keeps showing you that you are nothing, in even the most subtle ways, eventually you'll start believing it. Eventually you'll start acting like it. It's a complicated system that most of us don't understand. Even those of us caught in the middle of it... those of us who identify as part of these depressed people – often act out of the experience of victimhood.

In the 19th chapter of Exodus, Moses came down from the mountain and told his people the message he got directly from God's own mouth... that they – the Hebrew people – were God's chosen people. That though God loves everything in creation, but God loves them special. You need proof... look at what just happened. God brought you out of slavery. Remember, "Pharaoh and his army got drownd-ed in the Red Sea..." as we used to sing at my home church as a kid.

And God is ready to take it one step further. God made a covenant... a promise. "I'll take care of you. I will protect you. I got your back."

Can you imagine what it would do to your self-esteem if all of the sudden you realized that you were special. You thought you were a victim and for all intents and purposes you are. But deep inside you know that this is nothing. This tough time you are experiencing is nothing. This captivity you are under is nothing. This homeless wandering you are doing in the wildernesses of life is nothing.

You are God's chosen. The God who made it all has chosen you in particular as their own. You got nothing to worry about. Be not dismayed whatever betides. God will take care of you. Can you imagine what that would do for your confidence and outlook on life? There's nothing left for you to do but to love.

The people of Israel needed to hear that message. And I don't know about you but I need to hear it too, every once in a while. I need to be reminded that God chose me. Through the love of Jesus I have been adopted into this family with the benefits of full membership. That means I am part of the chosen. God is watching me too. We are God's chosen. If you have accepted the way of Jesus. If you have decided to follow the true Christian way – the way of love – then you are one of the chosen. Never let anyone tell you otherwise. You matter. God has ordained it so. You matter. God loves you.

God has chosen you... me... us. All we have to do is keep our part of the covenant. Because remember a covenant is a two-way agreement. God's part is God agrees to always be there for us. And our part of the covenant? Love back.

Love our creator – as represented in all creation.

Love each other.

And love ourselves.

We are God's chosen people.

So let's build a community of love. Let's operate from love.

Amen