

This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the people of prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for the third Sunday of Lent in the year of our LORD two thousand and eighteen.

Exodus 19:3-7

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."

7 So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him.

Exodus 20:1-17

1 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;

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 the Lord 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.

Our Bible story for today is a relationship story;
a getting along story;
a living *with* story that calls us to recognize God's love and God's hope for blessed community.

Most often the 10 commandments are lifted out of context and printed on walls and plaques and Sunday School handouts; held up as moral guides of the highest nature. But they actually aren't all that lofty, but rather offer the bare minimum of what is needed to live in relationship with God, with our own selves and with our neighbors.

You might recall that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus elevates the standards considerably by saying it is not enough to spurn physical touch with someone who is not your spouse, you are also responsible for your very thoughts; it is not enough to not murder, but you will be held accountable if you so much as call your brother a fool.

No, the 10 commandments are not particularly lofty; still, they offer some good, basic instructions for how to live a healthy life spiritually, physically, emotionally and socially.

The Bible places these 10 commandments, or 10 words as the Jewish community calls them, squarely within the context of a covenant relationship with God. In the 19th chapter of Exodus God calls the people of Israel God's treasured possession, a priestly kingdom, a holy nation. The apostle Peter later picks up these words in his letter to exiled Christians, assuring them and us that God has included followers of Jesus.

I Peter 2:9 we read:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into God's wonderful light.

It is important that we get the order correct:

First we are precious to God, like little birds carried on the wings of the mother eagle
then God delivers us,
then we live into what God calls us to do.

This is a critical distinction:

The order is not:

Do what God says,
then God will liberate you,
and only then will God see you as valuable.

No.

You are already dear to God's heart.

Because of God's deep love for you,
God has made a way for you through Jesus Christ, even as God made a way for the people of Israel through the Red Sea. It was through the mighty acts of God that the people of Israel were liberated from Egyptian slavery and it is through Christ that we have been set free. Now in your freedom, how will you live?

We will revisit that in a moment, but first this:

There are two commandments, implied, but not listed here, that both in Judaism and in Christianity are held up as the primary commandments; two commandments that come before all else:

*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength;
And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.
(Deuteronomy 6:4; Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:30-31)*

It has been said that the 10 commandments are 10 ways we express love to God and 10 ways we express love to our neighbor.

David Gill puts it this way:

Consider two examples. The first command, "You shall have no other gods before me," is not just good for God, it is an act of love for my neighbor. Why? Because it is good for my neighbor for me not to make money or power my god; it is good for my neighbor for me to maintain the gracious, forgiving Yahweh as my God; it is good for my neighbor that my God is the Creator of all people, all nations, both sexes, and not some tribal deity. Second example: certainly it is loving to my neighbor that I not kill him or her; but the sixth command is just as certainly about loving God. I must not kill my neighbor, not just because my neighbor wouldn't like it, but because God is the giver of my neighbor's life. I cannot be loving God if I kill those who belong to him.

[\(The Decalogue: Ten Words on Life, Love, and Justice.\)](#) The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself, Daniel B. Clendenin, Journey with Jesus Foundation, 2008. A guest essay by David Gill, B.A., UC Berkeley; M.A., San Francisco State; Ph.D., University of Southern California.)

Now that we are clear that the 10 commandments are about a love relationship with God, I would like to revisit this idea of freedom.

Samuel Wells recounts this story:

It was Boxing Day 1989. Romania was in turmoil.

The previous day, President Nicolae Ceausescu, unable to quell the tide of dissent in Bucharest, had been tried and executed. Now no one was in charge. Western reporters flooded into the country from the south, searching for someone who could speak English. Finally they found someone, and in one sentence she summed up not only Romania's predicament, but the human condition: "We have freedom," she said, "but we don't know what to do with it." (The Christian Century, March 15, 2000 p. 301)

"We have freedom, but we don't know what to do with it."

It has been my observation that though Americans love to talk and sing about freedom, in our day-to-day lives we become our own task masters, chaining ourselves to quite a variety of stuff.

As I read this list, perhaps you will find something that chains your heart and mind:

Cell phones

Television

Pornography

The stock market

Sports

Alcohol

Internet shopping

Work

Calendar

Family drama

Anger

A voice in your head that says you have not done enough

Of the 10 commandments,
the one that I think speaks most to living freely in an American context is the fourth commandment:
Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

For some reason American refuse to practice Sabbath.

It has been said that we choose restlessness over rest.

Rest is not just a neutral thing that we ignore.

It is something we push against.

We refuse it.

We refuse to rest.

To put it in terms of our Lenten journey, we refuse to empty ourselves; we refuse to fast from busyness.

We refuse, myself included, to take all the vacation time we are allotted.

Americans leave 429 million vacation days a year unused.

I have been a terrible example for you:

Working more hours a week than I am supposed to work when no one but myself expects me to do so;

when you have asked me to chill out and take some time off, I say “sure I will” and then don’t do it.

How can I expect you to rest when I don’t rest?

We refuse to shut off our phones.

I thought this was an interesting statistic:

40% of Americans check their work email while on vacation.

50% check work email while in bed

38% check work email at the dinner table. (from Fr. Rick Morley, Rector of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, Basking Ridge, New Jersey)

It might be interesting to do a survey on how many Presbyterians check email and text messages while they are in worship.

We refuse to allow our children to rest, but rather have them running hither and yon, hither and yon, hither and yon.

We refuse to speak to our culture and say “Today is my Sabbath day, I have marked it as the holy day”;

rather we let our culture declare to us

“Do a little more!”

“Do a little more!”

“Do a little more!”

It is utterly impossible for us to live into the freedom that God has given us if we do not practice Sabbath.

It is impossible for your children to live free if you do not let them practice Sabbath.

It has been said that this commandment is the one upon which all other swing.

It is the commandment that frees me to spend time with God; to show God love and attention.

It is the commandment that frees children to honor their parents by just being with them playfully enjoying one another’s company.

It is the commandment that frees us to get our minds and our hearts in the right place so that we celebrate with thanksgiving what God has given us, instead of coveting what God has given our neighbor; so that we can share with our neighbor a cup of coffee and talk to them, instead of talking about them.

It is the commandment that frees us to set aside our American idols, our American gods of achievement and productivity and competition; and instead enter into the alternate reality of eternal time where rest will be a celebration and laughter with God an everlasting delight.

Abraham Heschel was a Jewish rabbi whose practice of Sabbath was not only the highpoint of his week, it was the whole point. All things move toward the Sabbath.

“To observe the Sabbath is to celebrate the coronation of a day in the spiritual wonderland of time”
(Abraham Heschel, Sabbath).

I am enthralled by the Jewish practice of Sabbath:

of beginning at sunset on Friday evening and considering it Sabbath until sunset on Saturday evening.

What transformations would happen in our families if we observed the Sabbath from sunset on Saturday evening until sunset on Sunday evening?

What would happen if every Saturday evening we would gather as a family for the purpose of resting together; for the purpose of quite intentionally blessing our children; for the purpose of thanking God?

What would happen if we would try it for one month? From now until Easter, practicing Sabbath for a 24 hour period. Let me know how that works out for you, and ask me how it works out for me.

For you see, if I could give you one good gift,
it would be the Sabbath gift of blessed rest.

Now may our God who chooses rest
Rest upon you in grace
Rest before you in peace
And rest within you in
Honor, mystery, holiness and joy
Now and for a thousand generations

Besides today's message, I would like to leave you with this story from Rachel Naomi Remen
My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging. Riverhead Books; New York; 2000.

Blessing

On Friday afternoons when I would arrive at my grandfather's house after school, the tea would already be set on the kitchen table. My grandfather had his own way of serving tea. There were no teacups and saucers or bowls of granulated sugar or honey. Instead, he would pour the tea directly from the silver samovar into a drinking glass. There had to be a teaspoon in the glass first, otherwise the glass, being thin, might break.

My grandfather did not drink his tea in the same way that the parents of my friends did either. He would put a cube of sugar between his teeth and then drink the hot tea straight from his glass. So would I. I much preferred drinking tea this way to the way I had to drink tea at home.

After we had finished our tea my grandfather would set two candles on the table and light them. Then he would have a word with God in Hebrew. Sometimes he would speak out loud, but often he would close his eyes and be quiet. I know then that he was talking to God in his heart. I would sit and wait patiently because the best part of the week was coming.

When Grandpa finished talking to God, he would turn to me and say, “Come, Neshume-le.” Then I would stand in front of him and he would rest his hands lightly on the top of my head. He would begin by

thanking God for me and for making him my grandpa. He would specifically mention my struggles during that week and tell God something about me that was true. Each week I would wait to find out what that was. If I had made mistakes during the week, he would mention my honesty in telling the truth. If I had taken even a short nap without my nightlight, he would celebrate my bravery in sleeping in the dark. Then he would give me his blessing and ask the long-ago women I know from his many stories – Sarah, Rachel, Rebekah, and Leah – to watch over me.

These few moments were the only time in my week when I felt completely safe and at rest. My family of physicians and health professionals were always struggling to learn more and to be more. It seemed there was always more to know. It was never enough. If I brought home a 98 on a test from school, my father would ask, “And what happened to the other two points?” I pursued those two points relentlessly throughout my childhood. But my grandfather did not care about such things. For him, I was already enough. And somehow when I was with him, I know with absolute certainty that this was so.

My grandfather died when I was seven years old. I had never lived in a world without him in it before, and it was hard for me. He had looked at me as no one else had and called me by a special name, “Neshumle,” which means “beloved little soul.” There was no one left to call me this anymore. At first I was afraid that without him to see me and tell God who I was, I might disappear. But slowly over time I came to understand that in some mysterious way, I had learned to see myself through his eyes. And that once blessed, we are blessed forever.

Many years later when, in her extreme old age, my mother surprisingly began to light candles and talk to God herself, I told her about these blessings and what they had meant to me. She had smiled at me sadly. “I have blessed you every day of your life, Rachel,” she told me. “I just never had the wisdom to do it out loud.” (pgs 22-24)