

**Season after Pentecost**  
Commandment and Covenant  
Narrative Lectionary Year 1, Week 5  
October 5, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church    Hagerstown MD  
Readings: Matthew 5: 17-19; Exodus 19: 3-7; 20: 1-17  
"For Your Own Good ---- Really!"

*Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen*

A parking lot in Long Island, New York became a farmers and craft market once a week. Everyone brought his or her wares to buy, trade, and sell. One of the area farmers brought in a whole string of game birds. He had tied a string around one leg of each of the birds. The birds were all tied in such a way that all were controlled by a central stick held by the farmer. He had trained the birds to walk very dutifully in a circle so the buyers could see them before they were purchased.

Luckily for the birds, on this one particular day, a Hindu priest happened upon the scene. With a deep, religious respect for all of life, he purchased the birds and instructed the owner to set them free.

The farmer said, "Are you sure?"

The Hindu priest said, "Yes please cut all the strings and set them free."

The farmer said, "Okay, they belong to you."

Much to the surprise of the Hindu priest all the birds did with their new-found freedom was to march around again in a circle. The Hindu priest clapped his hands to shoo them away. However, all they did was to fly away five feet and begin to march around in a circle. The birds, which had been rescued by the priest and set free, continued to be trapped in a past pattern of behavior <sup>1</sup> that did not serve them in their current circumstances.

When we come upon the Israelites in today's reading, they are about three months into their new found freedom. In Egypt, they had been slaves and the rules of their oppressors were the rules to live by "or else." Now they had no rules, no boundaries or guidelines for living peacefully and equitably with one another as a community — as God's chosen people. Would they be like those rescued birds in the market ---- unable to cope with freedom..... Or maybe chose to return to the values, gods, and injustices they knew in Egypt?

The LORD God delivered them from slavery, provided water, food, victory over a warring tribe, the leadership of Moses and a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide them. They come to Mt. Sinai where they would park for a while. The Lord, who knows what pain and chaos humans can cause, is about to provide the Israelites with another essential so that they can they can enjoy freedom and peace and be God's

blessing to the world. That is God's purpose for the Commandments — to provide for the well-being of the human community whom God loves.

Did you notice how God prefaced the giving of the Ten Commandments? God did not say, "HERE! These are ten rule — Obey them and maybe I'll love you!" Instead, God begins with a wonderful announcement of the freedom they have and God's deeply personal and profound relationship with them : "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." Once nobody-slaves, they now have freedom *and* an identity. They are "somebodies". They are God's special people, liberated from slavery in Egypt by the Lord God who delivered them with purposeful love. "God does not give the law as a way to establish relationship with the people. God established the relationship and then gives the law" <sup>2</sup> so they can prosper and bless the world. Obeying the commandments then becomes a response of thanks, an expression of trust in the God who has rescued them and keeps promises. Obeying the commandments is to be a sign of their very identity as God's people.

Living in the wilderness with God's provisions, protection and presence, they receive the Ten Commandments — the way to live free as God's precious treasure, priestly people and holy nation. As Jesus will tells us many years later, those commandments can be summarized in this way: Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. God does not give us the law in order to perfect us or make us more spiritual. "We do not keep the commandments for our own pleasure of benefit. Rather, we keep them as a way to love God and neighbor."<sup>3</sup> "And that is good news. Good news for my neighbor. God loves them so much that God tells me not to kill, steal, commit adultery, and so on. And good news for me. God loves me so much that God tells my neighbor not to kill, steal, and so on."<sup>4</sup> This is how freed people live, God says, so all may know the freedom of living life in all its fullness.

The Ten Commandments, given to us as gift, are about freedom and love. We usually like the sound of that — freedom and love – good stuff. But then there's the struggle to keep those commandments. We are comforted to know that God's love for us is not dependent on our success — thank God. But we can't allow that to make us lazy or lethargic about trying. Even if our salvation may not be at risk, there is still a great deal at stake. "IF" you obey my voice and keep my covenant," God says, "you shall be my treasured possession, priestly kingdom and holy nation." That "if" isn't about God's love for us. But obeying God's commandments are woven into our vocation to be God's people so *that* the world may come to know God. You heard it at your baptism, "Let your light so shine before others that they see your good works and give glory to you Father in heaven."

When we obey God's voice and keep the covenant made with us at our baptism, we are bringing God's kingdom to earth, letting others see Jesus in flesh, modeling the power of being freed in Christ. When we don't obey, we oppose God's redeeming efforts and risk presenting a false, harmful view of God that can turn people away from our Lord. Loving God and loving our neighbor is not only a command to obey but a sacred calling we are privileged to live.

The Ten Commandments, God's law, were not designed to curtail the freedom of the Israelites or us. They were intended to protect the freedom and well being of all. "Here," God said "are ten rules for a way of life that works."<sup>5</sup> Those rules are about loving God by loving our neighbor. Obeying them is about choosing to trust God's wisdom and ways and believing God's promises. Following the Commandments are about the opportunity to be God's very own people, God's very own presence in a world that so needs it. When the Commandments were presented to the Israelites and us, God was saying, "Guard your life together. Guard your life with me. Here are ten rules that will help you do that. Please accept them as a gift from me."<sup>6</sup> God does not coerce us to obey. God does not make obedience a condition for God's love or promise to be faithful. That's who God is. A God who loves immeasurably and gives us a way of life that will protect our freedom and bless our neighbor, our world, and ourselves. That's who God is. Now the question is, who will we be? God's treasure or something else? Fly in circles or learn to soar from the One who bore us on eagles' wings? Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 10/4/14

#### ENDNOTE

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1. Story cited in "The Eighth Commandment: WHY WE NEED THE POLICE" by [Eric S. Ritz](#), The Ritz Collection, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-0000-0000-28

2. Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Exodus 19: 1-6, 20: 1-17" posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

3. Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Exodus 19: 1-6, 20: 1-17" posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

4. Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Exodus 19: 1-6, 20: 1-17" posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

5. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Peculiar Treasure" Gospel Medicine Cambridge Ma: Crowley Publications 1995, p. 47

6. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Peculiar Treasure" Gospel Medicine Cambridge Ma: Crowley Publications 1995 p. 48