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Proper 22 A: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

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The Ten Commandments

Judge Roy Moore, former chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, once waged and lost a stubborn fight to keep a granite monument of the Ten Commandments in the state courthouse. When a federal court ordered that Judge Moore have the monument removed, Moore refused, and then Justice Moore was removed.ⁱ It was, perhaps, easier to remove Judge Moore than his monument. To say that the monument is hefty is an understatement. At 5,280 pounds, or, more than 500 pounds per commandment, the monumental marble Decalogue actually buckled the 57-foot long 5-ton, I-beam crane used to lift it from the flatbed truck on which it was finally moved into the warehouse in which it is stored.ⁱⁱ When Moses first received the two stone tablets of the law on Mount Sinai, there is no way Moses could have carried them down from the mountain by himself if they had been anywhere near as big.ⁱⁱⁱ

“The Ten Commandments.” They even sound big, don’t they? Monumental. Monolithic. Weighty. Right? And apparently something we care deeply about, at least as something to debate when the subject of displaying them in public spaces comes up. Americans know they are important, weighty, even if, according to a survey by Kelton

research and reported in the Washington Post, the average American can name all seven ingredients in a McDonald's Big Mac, but cannot recall the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."^{iv} Religion Professor Stephen Prothero, in his book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*, cites studies showing that a majority of Americans can name only 4 out of the big Ten Commandments.^v

We know they're important, even if we're not really sure what they are. Even if we can't name them, we picture them as weighty. Granite seems an appropriate medium to memorialize them. But granite is also good for tombstones—is that how we regard these 10 Laws?

I'm mentioning this because somehow the way we have come to think of them is as not just weighty in the sense of importance, but in the sense of burdensome, an encumbrance. The somber, even grim side of our Jewish and Christian tradition. Just when we were starting to have some fun, out of the clouds comes a big heavenly finger wagging and a voice that booms, "Thou shalt not. . ."

I was once doing a children's sermon on the Ten Commandments. I wanted to give the children a reminder of the sermon, so I gave them each a un-inflated balloon that had the Ten Commandments written on it. After church, the children went off to Sunday School. In one of the classes, the teacher, a well-meaning, but somewhat strict man asked the students if they could name the ten commandments. One boy, often on the hyperactive side, started emptying his pockets. The teacher said, "What are you doing? I asked you a question. Why are you fidgeting?" The boy said, "Pastor Amy gave us the Ten Commandments. They're in my pocket." "Why that's ridiculous!" said the teacher,

“How can the Ten commandments fit in your pocket?” The boy fished out the balloon. “Got it,” he said. “Oh,” said the teacher. “Sorry.” “You want to see the 10 commandments?” said the boy.

I know the commandments were originally written on stone tablets—portable, breakable, stone tablets. Moses carried them down the mountain, and I imagine the people had to crowd in pretty close to see them for themselves. Maybe not pocket-sized, but something still on a personal scale. Not something that could crush you if the crane breaks. And I wonder, with all due reverence to the beauty and permanence and tradition of stone tablets, if somehow a balloon may convey more of the sense of what God was trying to do; a balloon, filled with life-giving breath.

Here’s what I mean. The Ten Commandments have a preface. And the preface is not, “Here are My Ten Laws. Obey Them!”^{vi} The preface is a reminder of freedom. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2). In other words, you are no longer slaves. No longer captive. No longer subject to the whims and forces, desires and designs of others. You are free people. Here’s what life looks like when you are liberated. Free. I am the one who set you free. Live a life of freedom. It looks like this.

Because the Lord is your God, you are free from serving other gods. You do not have to bow and scrape and give your allegiance to anything that is unworthy and can’t give you the help you need anyway. These false gods could be the kind of idols worshipped by the peoples around the Israelites, made out of granite, by the way, too heavy to be moved easily, not portable, and neither willing nor able to travel with the

people, like the Lord our God was, accompanying the people in the desert, visiting Moses on the mountaintop, leading the people, going before them and behind as they traveled. And God still does. You are free to trust the only God, and the only God worthy of your trust. You are free. You are free to rest from your work and observe the Sabbath. You do not have to work all the time to prove your worth. You are free. You don't have to resort to lying and murder and jealousy and greed to establish yourself in the world. You are free. I am the Lord your God, who gave you freedom.

Our prayer book says, in answer to this question: what is the purpose of the Ten Commandments? The Ten Commandments were given to define our relationship with God and our neighbors.^{vii} The Ten Commandments are born of God's setting us free. Keeping the Ten Commandments is our obedient response to the God who loves us. God loves us unconditionally, but God is God and we are not. We need guidance. The promise of God's love for us, unconditional, complete, gracefully given, unearned, unmerited, needs to be met in us, by obedience, not because God can't love us without our obedience, but because we humans need some ways to shape our response, to guard our freedom, as the prayer book says, "to define our relationship with God and our neighbors."

Barbara Brown Taylor uses a great image to describe this. She writes, "promise without law is like a tent without tent poles." The Ten Commandments "would shape the life and identity of the people of God, and be a force that would preserve it against every threat." Taylor imagines God giving the gift of the law and saying: "Sink these ten posts

in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them, and together you may survive the wilderness....Guard your life together. Guard your life with me.”^{viii}

God gave the Ten Commandments out of love for us, as a way for us, not to earn love, but to dwell within it, with God and our neighbors, to acknowledge that love is not a warm feeling, although I wish you many of those warm feelings, love is an act of the will, a verb, something that takes action, can be shown, makes a difference. Love, obedience and service go together. In the words of a prayer from our prayer book, to know God is eternal life, and to serve God is perfect freedom.^{ix} To serve God is perfect freedom. The prayer continues, “Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” Our defense is God, who sets us free, over and over again, from sin, and reminds us, through the gift of the Law, that we should live like the free creatures God made us to be, loving God with our whole heart, strength, soul, and mind, and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

So today I am giving you a homework assignment. You are free to do it, or not. If you do not know the 10 Commandments, learn them this week. All 10. And when you know all 10, read the explanation of them in the Book of Common Prayer. (I’ll put the link on the website, in case you don’t have your own copy.) Write these 10 Commandments on your heart. Don’t leave them at a distance, like some ancient idol or a cold stone monument. Carry them in your mind. Live them with your life. “Sink these ten posts in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them, and together” we “may survive the wilderness.”

Amen.

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roy_Moore

ⁱⁱ In a sermon by Thomas G. Long, “Dancing the Decalogue,” in *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2006, page 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ In my imagination they are more the size of the ones mounted next to our pulpit at St. Anne’s, given in memory of a faithful parishioner and vestryman, Weems McFadden, by his family many years ago.

^{iv} http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2009/12/religions_magnificent_seven.html

^v <http://www.stephenprothero.com>

^{vi} After Tom Long, *ibid.*

^{vii} *The Book of Common Prayer*, 848.

^{viii} Barbara Brown Taylor, in *Gospel Medicine*, and Kathryn Matthews Huey, in <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/october-2-2011.html>.

^{ix} *The Book of Common Prayer*, 99.