

“Commandments for Community”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20

One of the things I hate about this pandemic time is all the signs we see. Here at the church, I prefer for us to not have lots of signs on the doors. I’ve always felt that to present a hospitable welcome to guests and visitors, it’s most helpful to have as little signage on the doors as possible. Perhaps just a sign that says, “Welcome! Come on in!” would be enough, but nothing more than that.

Well, that’s not realistic right now. In fact, it’s not safe to not have signage up. We have to remind people to please wear a mask, to not come in if they have symptoms of the coronavirus, to use hand sanitizer as they enter the building, to stay six-feet apart while they’re inside. Everyone gets a kick out of our “X’s” down the hallway – I’ve caught a few people jumping from one to the next like hopscotch! But they provide an important visual reminder to stay a certain distance from one another.

And if you’re out in public, you can’t help but be inundated with signs. If you’re in a store, you look to your left or right, and there’s your reminder to keep your mask on. You look down at the floor, and there’s your reminder to stay six-feet apart from other shoppers. I haven’t tried looking up, but at this point, I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s signage up on the ceiling, too. We are living in a time when signs are all around us.

And it’s essential that they are there. They are telling us what we need to do – wear a mask, use sanitizer – and what we don’t need to do – don’t stand close to one another, don’t shake each other’s hands – in order to stay healthy and safe. Signs right now are the written reminders of the behaviors we need to embrace for our community to be well. They remind us that in order for the members of the community to thrive, we must act in certain ways – and not act in other ways.

The same might be said of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments serve as reminders of how God desires for us to relate to God and to one another. In the Westminster Catechism, it is asked: “Where is the moral law summarily comprehended?” The answer is: “The moral law is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.” Then, “What is the sum of the Ten Commandments?” Answer: “The sum of the Ten Commandments is: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves” (7.041-7.042).

If that sounds familiar, it should. Jesus said these very words when he was asked what was the greatest commandment. And in this

sentence is the summary of the Ten Commandments as they speak to our relationship with God, and with one another. The first four commandments speak to how we are to honor God: no other gods, no graven images, not to take God's name in vain, remember the Sabbath day. The last six commandments speak to how we are to reflect our love for God in our relations with our neighbor: honor your father and mother, don't kill, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't covet, don't bear false witness. In this story from Scripture, we are given a guide by which we are to live in faith to God and with one another.

Kathryn Johnston writes: *In order to be community, we need rules. Without rules there is chaos, and people get hurt. To be sure, people get hurt even with rules, but usually that's because we ignore the rules or we disagree about them or we don't like someone else's interpretation of them (Please, wear your face mask).*

God's beloved children keep making a mess out of ten very simple rules. These rules are so simple that Jesus summarizes them by citing just two Old Testament commandments. Tablet 1: Love God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength. How? By loving God above all gods, by not worshiping idols, by not taking the Lord's name in vain, and by honoring the Sabbath. Tablet 2: Love your neighbor as yourself. How? Honor your elders. Don't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. The Ten Commandments, with their intimidating weight, are just these two commandments in more detail . . .

The foundation of who we are is our obedience to and love of God. Once that relationship is in place, it is time to turn to our relationship with those around us. How do we sustain life in community?

A faith community's rules are based on context, and sometimes they need to shift when the context changes. We are all living in a time of contextual change right now. I've lost count of how many unwritten rules for our community of faith will look totally different if and when we get together in person again. The unwritten rule that the offering plates don't cross the center aisle? Gone — no more offering plates passed. The unwritten rule that real ministry can't be done online? Gone. The unwritten rule that only certain people sit in specific spots? Gone — hello, social distancing.

It feels like everything has changed — and yet the most important things have not. Stick with the top ten, and then go from there.

We worship together as communities of faith not because we are perfect at the rules but because we hold onto the faithful knowledge that God's grace and love are what unite us — not the rules. We are going to disagree. We are going to disappoint. We are going to break the rules.

And so, we hold one another up, we unite in our love for God and in God's returned love for us, and we remain community in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (Kathryn Johnston, [The Christian Century](#), September 8, 2020).

The Ten Commandments are not just guidelines for us as individuals. They are guidelines for us as the Body of Christ to be in a right relationship with our God. We are to honor God, not honor our accomplishments. We are to worship God, not worship our talents or performances. We are to love one another, and in so doing we love God. We are called to model maturity in our behavior, and in so doing show the commitment our Lord expects from us.

How do we apply these commandments for community? Is the answer to make these commandments more visible? Build more monuments, or do direct mail flyers, or send everyone we know a text every day that includes the Ten Commandments? Paste them over Facebook or Twitter or Instagram? I mean, I guess that's an option, and perhaps you think that would make a difference in the world.

But I suppose I take a different perspective. These commandments are more than words on a page, or etchings on a stone tablet. They are commands for how to live in the light of God's love. They are actions to live out in community. For me, when I see them being enacted by others, then I am more inclined to emulate them in my own life.

In the face of great responsibility and stress, when I witness a civic leader choosing to take a day of rest, then I am reminded of the importance of remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy.

When I witness an individual who has great material wealth, but chooses to live simply and give most of those riches to those in need, then I am reminded of the importance of not making any graven images to replace the Lord our God.

In the face of incredible human loss of life in our country from gun violence, not only am I reminded of the command to not murder, but also of the insatiable goodness of the human race to help, care, and love in the face of death and loss – to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The Ten Commandments are not meant to be memorialized on stone tablets or written on walls. They are meant to be written on our hearts, our minds, our souls. Someone may read the commandments in a public place, but reading them is not the same as experiencing them. I promise you that the moral law will stick with someone when they are shown kindness, are given respect, and are loved for who they are, and then are told to do the same to others. That is when the moral law is written on people's hearts, and is promptly spread in God's name.

I've always found it interesting that eight of the Ten Commandments are written in the negative: "You shall not do this or that." Perhaps they were written that way so that we would not be confused. But I also wonder if it might be helpful to consider how those negatives can be thought of in the positive.

Instead of, "You shall have no other gods before me," think, "We shall honor and serve our living, loving God." Instead of, "You shall not make an idol," think, "We shall worship our Lord who is too great for

human images or statues.” Instead of, “You shall not steal” or “You shall not commit murder,” think, “We shall honor and respect our neighbor and his or her belongings, and we shall honor and cherish life, for it is a gift solely from our God.”

Not all signs in this troubling time are frustrating; in fact, some signs have reminded me of the community’s love for one another and for their God. When we were all locked-down in the spring, signs popped up in yards. Some were for our graduating seniors, letting them know they were not forgotten as they couldn’t enjoy the traditional senior year celebrations. And throughout our congregation, signs were placed outside people’s homes letting them know they were loved and not forgotten. These signs and others reminded me this year that we are seeking, as a community of faith, to love the Lord our God with all our being, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

The Commandments are not meant to live on a page, or be idolized on stone tablets or as writing on the wall. The Commandments are meant to live in our hearts, in our actions, in our faith. As we move through the events and scenes of our life, may we reflect our faith in God through the relationships we make with our fellow brother and sister, giving praise and glory to the one, triune God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.