

## **Freedom, Grace, and the Common Good**

October 1, 2017 – World Communion Sunday

Rev. Dr. Susan Gilbert Zencka

Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church

Texts: Exodus 20:1-21, Exodus 32:1-15

We've been following the book of Exodus for six weeks now. A couple of weeks ago we talked about the freedom that the Israelites gained as they escaped from slavery in Egypt. And we noted that they had achieved that physical freedom, but that there are different ways to be free, and we talked about some of the ways that we might find ourselves "unfree"- things like addictions of various kinds, or anger issues, or obsession with money and security, or over-focusing on relationships.

The Bible, in discussing freedom, makes it clear that we are not only freed *from*, but we are also *freed for*. That is, it is not only that we are freed from sin, death, illness, shame, and captivity, brokenness—we are also freed for participating with God in the ongoing creation of the world; we are freed for participating in God's mission of love; we are freed for working for justice; we are freed for displaying the Kingdom of God to the world.

Freedom isn't about doing whatever we want – that can just lead to chaos. Freedom is about being free to become our best selves, the people we were created to be, using our gifts and our passions to make the world better. You may remember the definition that Frederick Buechner offers for "vocation" – the place where your great gladness meets the world's deep hunger. We are freed to be co-creators with God of the world God intends.

And just as God's act of creation is the undoing of chaos in the story of Genesis at the beginning of the Bible, so too is our co-creating with God an undoing of the chaos in the world – chaos like hunger, violence, broken relationships, broken lives. Our mission is the continual undoing of that kind of chaos – the death-dealing ways that are in opposition to the life-giving ways of God.

We see these ways contrasted in the two stories that we read this morning. God provides an avenue to deeper freedom by giving the people the gift of the Ten Commandments. And as we have already seen in the Garden of Eden, humans sometimes find it counter-intuitive that freedom comes through submission. Submission to God. Now I know that in the mainline Protestant churches we don't often use language like submission. But it is the key to freedom—freedom to live in safety and health.

Indeed, submission is essential to freedom. In a society, if people don't submit to the law, we get anarchy, which may look like freedom at first, but because there is no commitment to the common good, ends up thwarting freedom.

The commandments are really a beautiful system addressing our relationship to God, our relationship to one another, and to our hearts – taken together, they create a balance between freedom and the common good, so that each person, and the community of

persons, all have the freedom to develop healthy and whole lives, with healthy relationships. They create the conditions for *shalom*—that word that is misunderstood as meaning only peace, but in fact describes a holistic peace that is the result of healthy relationships with God, with one another, and with our own hearts.

The prologue helps us to know that these are a gift: “I am YHWH, your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves.” Note how relationally God describes Godself – providing God’s own name, and saying “your God” – remember in the movie *The Wizard of Oz* how the wizard describes himself “I am Oz, the great and terrible” – but our God roots identity in relationship: “I am YHWH, *your* God” and then goes on to remind the people of the very real experience they have had of God’s love and care “who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves.” It’s all about grace—God loving us, and showing that love in concrete ways: first by freeing the people from slavery, and now by giving them, and us, the way to deeper freedom.

And so the first few commandments describes our relationship to God—we are to have no other gods, we are to make no images of god, we are to worship nothing else, and then the commandment which is usually translated “you shall not take the name of YHWH in vain,” but which scholar and translator Richard Elliott Friedman explains really should be translated, “you shall not bring up the name of YHWH, your God, for a falsehood” – that is, we should not make an oath in God’s name and then not keep the oath—our words about God should reflect our living.

The next commandment has to do with the Sabbath, and this is not just establishing that God will be worshipped; it also establishes that people will not work 7 days a week. It is the first step toward a just society—and it is for everyone, including the servants. Everyone is entitled to a day off, including the animals. This is not only just, it is healthy—notice how wholehearted worship of God re-orient us toward justice and health.

The next several commandments are about how we treat one another: honor your father and mother; do not murder; do not steal; do not lie. And then finally the commandment which helps to make the others possible: do not covet. This is not an extra burden placed on people, it shows that the things we do that are wrong have their origin in our heart-attitudes. If we don’t want other peoples’ things, other peoples’ spouses, other peoples’ homes, then we are unlikely to need to steal, to commit adultery, to murder, or even to lie. As Jesus will later make clear in the Sermon on the Mount, the condition of our hearts shapes our actions.

So the commandments are not just a checklist—they are a guideline for ordering our hearts, our relationships with others, and our relationship with God so as to maximize our freedom. When we are dwelling on what other people have that we want, we are becoming unfree—we might be captive to resentments, or to obsessions, or to lust, or to hatred—and all of these make us unfree in essential ways. As I wrote this, I was able to see a perfect example of this kind of unfreedom. Our dogs can be somewhat jealous of one another. Gracie was happily curled up on the couch, relaxing. I called Santo over to pet him a little – and Gracie was so jealous that she was compelled to immediately gave up her comfort and

relaxation to come over and see if I'd pet her. Her jealousy, and coveting what Santo had left her unfree to enjoy her relaxation.

Just as an alcoholic learns that by submitting to abstinence, she can gain freedom from compulsive drinking; so too, when we submit to God's ways, we can be freed from our compulsions, addictions, obsessions, and disordered relationships.

The commandments really are about right relationships, about right order. When our relationships with God, or others, or our own hearts are disordered, the community is subject to disorder and chaos as well. This is why Jesus said that loving God with all our hearts, souls, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves is so important. Getting these relationships right creates the conditions for shalom or God's kingdom. And so the gift of the Commandments is another step in the ongoing creation of God's world, a world that is meant to be grounded in love and justice.

The second story is the story of the Golden Calf – but it really is the story of us all. Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments. And the people grew anxious. They weren't able to trust in God, and just wait to see what unfolded. And as they lost trust in God, they looked for ways to handle their anxiety, they wanted to find something else to worship, to put their trust in. They chose a Golden Calf. We choose financial security. Or status. Or other peoples' approval. Or any number of ways we numb our worries with alcohol, drugs, or food. Or we distract ourselves and makes ourselves feel strong by managing our fears with anger and resentment. Or we become dependent on other people for our happiness—and when we are that dependent, we lose freedom. We can't love, because the relationship is based on obsession. Whatever we choose to manage our anxieties with instead of trusting God and putting God first—these become idols in our lives. Indeed, many of the idols we turn to have their roots in selfishness—they all come down to putting ourselves first—and we were creating in love for love: the way to our own contentment comes through loving and caring for others.

And so the freedom we are called to is not a willfulness in which we assert that we can do whatever we want, making ourselves and our desires the center of our lives. That's idolatry just as much as worshipping the Golden Calf was – and it leads just as certainly to disordered relationships.

The freedom God desires for us is not about *willfulness*, but about *willingness*—a willingness to make God's mission our mission, to submit to the law of love, to embrace the mutuality – with God and with others – that characterizes God's dream and God's kingdom. The freedom God gives us not only makes us free, but creates a community where we can be free from harm, free from hatred and jealousy; and free for justice, free for love, free for community, free for mutuality, authenticity, and trust. This freedom makes it easy to understand why Jesus sometimes called the kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.