



Where There Is a Way, There Is a Life

TEXT
Exodus 20:1–17

October 25, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In the 1950s, the Fraternal Order of Eagles teamed up with movie director Cecil B. DeMille for a unique promotion of the movie *The Ten Commandments*. Together they donated monuments of the Ten Commandments to communities all around the country. These monuments were placed in prominent locations — in public parks, in front of courthouses and, in some cases, on the grounds of the state capitols.

These monuments reflected the zeitgeist, as the 1950s brought public, even government-sanctioned, expression of religion to the fore in many ways. This was the decade in which “In God We Trust” was added to American currency, and the Pledge of Allegiance was amended to include the words “under God.” But times have changed. What once seemed so innocent it could be used to promote a movie, in more recent years has resulted in Supreme Court cases.¹

Just this week, after discovering that the court ordered the removal of a six-foot granite monument of the Ten Commandments from the Oklahoma State Capitol, Pastor John Riggs of Texoma Cowboy Church rode his horse for the better part of a week to present a one-foot size

monument of the Ten Commandments to Gov. Fallin of Oklahoma. Pastor Rigg said he was riding for God and for this country.²

I wonder if God was pleased with the Fraternal Order of Eagles being so casual about the commandments that they could be used as a publicity stunt for a movie. And I wonder if God is pleased with contemporary Christians being so casual about the commandments that it seems “having them displayed is more important than having them obeyed.”³

The giving of the Ten Commandments was a singular moment in Israel’s history and faith. They were freed from slavery. They walked out of Egypt, led by the hand of providence. This was a defining moment in God’s relationship with Israel. The Exodus reveals God’s grace — God’s desire for God’s children to be free.

It is in this context of freedom that God grants the Ten Commandments. This is how one lives in God’s freedom. Before God says, “Thou shalt not ...” God says, “You are free now. I brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” God then gives the commandments as if to say, “This is what real freedom looks like.”

Remember that God is the center of everything, so don’t let anything else get in the way.⁴

Time is precious, so take one day a week to remind yourself what all the rest of the days are for.⁵

Relationships are precious, so make sure you pay attention to your marriage. It’s too important to take for granted.⁶

This series is “The Giver That Keeps On Giving.” Giving the law is not often seen as an expression of generosity in our day — but I will try to persuade you. We live in complicated times, and you would be forgiven if you questioned my suggestion that God’s giving the Ten Commandments is an expression of God’s generosity. These days, a growing number of people are concerned about associating God with law or commandment or expectation of any kind.

I have been reading Christian Smith and others in their book *Lost in Transition*. They point out that while some in society are very clear about right and wrong — and they will ride into town to bring you the message — increasingly, we are a culture that is not only uncertain about what is right and wrong, but even worried about defining right and wrong. Morality is often reduced

to individual opinion. They believe that there are no larger truths or ways to be; it's up to each of us to decide for each of us, and none of us is to judge another.

Smith calls this "moral individualism." Moral individualism says, If it seems good to you, if you think it is good, then it's good. If you think cheating on your exam or on your taxes or on your spouse is a good thing, then it is a good thing.⁷

This, of course, can only be true if there is no moral law bigger than our perspective. Why is this "everyone comes up with their own rules" approach increasingly common in our time?

That's a complicated question, but a portion of the response might be we have lived through 9/11. On that early morning, we witnessed the damage that violent religious fundamentalism can produce. We knew in our gut that this was not of God.

We have seen what happens when fundamentalist faith embraces law, seeks to associate that law with force and seeks to impose this view on the neighbor. That doesn't seem holy. And so in response, many hold a suspicion of religious conviction and view that the only moral commandment is "Don't judge anyone."

I like the generous spirit of that. It speaks truth. I am not called to judge anyone. Any judging that needs to occur, we should leave that to God. But I also think that the laissez-faire attitude toward morality leaves us a bit lost. When the ultimate good is reduced to my best idea,

then there is no room for God. It's not simply a matter of righteousness or unrighteousness; it's that without a discernment of what is good, we are lost. I think God gives us a way to live because God doesn't wish us to be lost.

Tom Long tells the story of being in the senior play in high school.⁸ He was the prop man. The director of the play was the new English teacher in his high school. She poured herself into this play. She met students before school learning lines and blocking. After school they were painting sets and sewing costumes. They worked all spring. Tom said, "Opening night came." The house was packed. As the play started, everything was going perfectly. It was a comedy, and the audience laughed frequently and loudly.

Halfway into the second act, one of the actors forgot his lines. Just as that English teacher was about to whisper the line, the actor spoke. It wasn't a line in the script, but it was a funny line, and the crowd roared with laughter. With that laughter still ringing in his ears, he made up another line. It wasn't as funny, but a few people laughed. So he made up another. The others on stage could not keep up.

The play disintegrated before them. Tom said he doesn't remember how they got out of it, but he does remember that first-year English teacher — who had labored with them night and day, working as an act of grace to make sure they had the words — standing off stage, tears crawling down her face.

We have the freedom to make up our own lines; we just don't have the ability to make up the play. When we try to make everything up on our own, it will leave us lost.

Israel left slavery behind. They are wandering into God's freedom, and it is then that they receive the law; they receive words telling them how they can live.

If I understand the text, it teaches us that we need a way to live. For God to offer a way is to offer life.

In a world that is complex and confusing, to show us a way when we feel lost is a gracious gift. We are defined by grace, which means we are free. But we are free to do what? Free to be whom? This is what I mean.

Camp Buc is a church camp cradled by North Carolina mountains, and when I was a kid, we would go there for church camp. One of the common activities at camp is to hike the mountain.

I was one of the older kids, and I announced that I would lead a kid's hike on the mountain. You went over here and caught the trail, and it would lead you up the mountain. Then you could come out on the other side of the pond and you were back home.

It looked easy enough. There was a trail, which we enjoyed, but paid little attention to. It wasn't long before I realized the view of the mountain looked different when you were on the mountain, rather than in camp. We had walked enough that I thought we should have finished the hike, but the trail was not as clear anymore. We were lost. I

kept saying, “We go this way ... I think.” Someone else said, “No, we go that way.”

We were debating, when a kid named Franklin — who was anything but an outdoors type — said, “Follow the dots, they will get you home.”

“What are you talking about?”

He said, “There’s one ... a red dot painted on the tree trunk. Follow that. Look for the next one.” Sure enough, a few yards down the mountain was another red dot. Follow the dots, they will get us home. We did and, after some time, came out on the other side of the pond — just in time for supper.

It’s easy to get lost in this world. God has given us some dots.

*Tell the truth, and remember that’s never as easy as you think it is.*⁹

*When your parents grow old, make sure they are cared for. There was a time they took care of you; then they will need you to care for them.*¹⁰

*Don’t take what doesn’t belong to you — things or power.*¹¹

*And don’t let your life be defined by a need for more. Learn what it means to be satisfied.*¹²

*Talk about God, but remember that when you do, God will listen to what you say. So talk about God in a way that would please God.*¹³

These are the dots that will get you home.

The commandments are not given to us to set up on display. They are not given to us to judge our neighbors. They are the dots that get us home.

There is one more thing to understand about these commandments. They are not arbitrary. They describe what is always and already true in God’s world.

When our kids were small, we told them not to play in the street. We had to teach them that they couldn’t play in the street. That was the commandment. You can play in the yard, but you can’t play in the street; for if you play in the street, you will die. (I didn’t tell them that part, but the truth is, that’s what I was worried about). Play in the street and, sooner or later, it’s not going to be good for you. The commandment wasn’t arbitrary; the commandment named the reality of the world. This is how you live! This is what freedom looks like.

But rules can be broken, and one of my children — I’m not going to tell you which one because I wouldn’t want to embarrass my son — seemed to delight in breaking this rule.

And I would have to restate the commandment. But the commandment is not just a rule. This commandment names the reality of the world. It names the way things are. The street is dangerous. You can break the commandment, but you can’t make the street a safe place to play.

But think about this. If the worst had happened and injury had occurred, I would never have stood on the curb and recited the commandment. The commandments were not given to demonstrate unrighteousness; they were given so that we would know how to live. They provide light on the path for those who are lost.

And when we are lost, the thing we need most is to know how to find our way home. These words provide the dots.

¹Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace* (2010), p. 1

²*The Oklahoman*, October 23, 2015

³I am certain that I have heard someone else use this turn of phrase, but I cannot remember who. In any case, it is not original with me.

⁴Paraphrase of the 1st Commandment

⁵Paraphrase of the 4th Commandment

⁶Paraphrase of the 7th Commandment

⁷Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition* (2011), pp. 21–26

⁸Tom told this story at Massanetta Bible Conference 1995.

⁹Paraphrase of the 9th Commandment

¹⁰Paraphrase of the 5th Commandment

¹¹Paraphrase of the 8th Commandment

¹²Paraphrase of the 10th Commandment

¹³Paraphrase of the 3rd Commandment

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.