

October 18, 2020

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Matthew 22: 34-40

Commanded...to love
The Reverend Mark Mares

When I left home to begin my undergrad education at Hope College, *just* twelve blocks away from where I lived, my mother warned me, “don’t forget your roots!” It was a common phrase that I had heard her tell my older siblings growing up. She often said it to remind us about our roots in the church, our faith, our family, and *la lucha*—the struggle and hard work that was needed to succeed in life. As a 3rd generation Puerto-Rican/Mexican-American I’ve grown up in the ‘in-between’ – what I like to call, the hyphen.

I’m reminded of a scene from the movie *Selena*. A film that I loved watching growing up. *Selena* tells the story of a young, Tejano singer, and her rising blossoming career, which was tragically cut short with her death at age 23. In the film, Selena is traveling in Texas with her father (who also happens to be her manager) and brother (leader of the band), while they discuss the possibility of touring in Mexico. Her father doesn’t like the idea because the Mexican press will “eat them alive,” because they aren’t Mexican enough. He explains one reason is that while her Spanish sounds fine when she sings, it sounds funny when she talks. He then goes on to say, “being a Mexican-American is tough. Anglos jump all over you if you don’t speak English perfectly, Mexicans jump all over you if you don’t speak Spanish perfectly. We have to be twice as perfect as anyone else...our family has been here for centuries, and yet they treat us as if we just swam across the Rio Grande. I mean we got to know about John Wayne and Pedro Infante...it’s exhausting.”¹

I loved that scene, because I deeply resonated with it. I’ve felt that way. I’ve experienced a home and church life that was predominantly culturally Latinx, and a school and work life that was predominantly Dutch white. I learned how to navigate those different spaces, to negotiate the different power dynamics.

But my mom’s words to me as I left for school – don’t forget your roots – weren’t meant as a mandate, so much as an invitation, to remember who I was as I left home to forge my own identity in the world, and navigate belonging – in life.

¹Gregory Nava, *Selena* (Warner Bros. 1997; Q Productions), DVD.

Just before the passage from Exodus we read this morning, God gives Moses some words to share with the Israelites. Words that God wants them to remember.

“And then, it says, that “God spoke all these words,” and what follows is a list we know of well, a list we call, the Ten Commandments. Now, if someone put you on the spot, could you name them all?”

The Rabbi Joseph Telushkin says that we shouldn't be discouraged if we can't remember them all, he says, even though the Ten Commandments are the cornerstone document for Jewish and Western morality, most people can't name them all. He says that for Jews, they place a greater importance on performing these commands, whereas for Christians, we place a greater emphasis on having faith. So to illustrate this, he shares the old joke, when a Lutheran minister and his rabbi friend part, the minister says: “Keep the faith.” To which the rabbi responds: “Keep the commandments.”²

We've heard it said, that as Christians, we don't live under the Law. Jesus came to fulfill the law. What then are we to do with these commandments?

Perhaps, as Rev. Spalding alluded to last week, these commandments, that flow from Mt. Sinai, are God's instructions for the people of Israel, for how to live, how to stay alive together – as a community.

I want to suggest that these commandments are more than moral codes from which we are to live by, but instead, they are a permission, a permission to live before God as human beings, in a properly creaturely freedom that is generated and sustained by God.

In other words, these commandments remind us of our “creaturely-ness” before God, our Creator, but also of our humanness, between our neighbor and self.

Randy Woodley, the indigenous scholar, says that “many Native prayers begin with words like this: ‘Creator, have pity on me, remember that I am just a human being.’” He says, “To our people, being human is a good thing. When we forget our humanity to try to take the place of the Creator is when our actions are really shameful.”³

If nothing else we are reminded by these ten commandments, that they are never our possession, any more than the God who uttered them is. Israel's encounter with God at Sinai stands as the seminal event in the life of the people of Israel. So much so that some scholars suggest that “the book of Exodus is the first book of the Bible.”

² Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, Jewish Literacy (William Morrow, 2001), 40-41.

³ Randy S. Woodley, Shalom and the Community of Creation (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 87.

The point is that the exodus from Egypt inaugurates God’s redemptive work in the life of Israel. That redemptive work took shape at Sinai in the giving of the “law of life.” Indeed, not until *after* Israel had been rescued from the hand of Pharaoh did God require them to live in a particular way. You see, God’s grace freed Israel from the house of slavery; the Law came after grace, and is, therefore, itself grace.

Elie Wiesel, writer of the widely acclaimed work, *Night*, in which he recounts his experience in a Nazi concentration camp, shares about an experience of how a Jewish man remained anchored even within a concentration camp... he writes: “I remember a Lithuanian preacher, a *maggid*, who wandered among us every Friday night, accosting everyone, with the hint of a smile: ‘Brother Jew -- don’t forget, it’s Shabbat.’ He wanted to remind us that Shabbat reigned over time and the world despite the smoke and stench.”⁴

My friends, in a world marked --
by so much violence and hate,
by so much loss and pain,
by so much abuse and exploitation,
by so much division and
by so many unanswered questions...
the wisdom and grace of these
commandments, is that they invite us to
remember our roots, to remember not only who we are, but whose we are.

The opening words are what anchor everything... “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” These words knit and hold the tender fabric of our lives together, because they carry this truth that we are never to forget: The love of God that binds the world together, that binds us together, that binds the triune God together, is the love that is animated by this very same God.

It’s out of this love, the people of Israel were commanded, to have no other gods before their God, to not make any idols, to not take

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⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 87.