

A Burden or A Gift?
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“A Burden or A Gift?” Homily, Pilgrim Church UCC, October 5, 2014 (Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, and 12-20)

This summer my sister and I visited Glacier National Park in Montana. I’m not exactly big on camping, so we stayed in this cute little motel in Columbia Falls. Near our motel was a truly fascinating site—on the side of the road in kind-of the middle of nowhere, Montana we saw God’s Ten Commandments Park. It was a huge field with crosses and American flags and large billboards all lined up with creepy 1950s Sci-Fi writing that listed the Ten Commandments among other inspiring Biblical verses. Maureen and I just studied this peculiar scene as we drove past and she goes, “Before you ask, I will not go to The Ten Commandments Park with you.” So alas we didn’t stop at God’s Ten Commandments Park! But from what we saw, not sure we missed much—it really was just some American flags, crosses, and billboards with Bible verses in the middle of a field.

In our country, it’s become so cliché to fight over where the Ten Commandments can be displayed. I did some research on God’s Ten Commandments Park in Columbia Falls, Montana. There’s a group that has set out to put the Ten Commandments in various locations throughout America and the world. In this case, they bought ten acres from a rancher and set up their billboards right on the side of Route 2 knowing that tourists (like us) would inevitably take this route to Glacier National Park—there’s just one road to get there. Even the Montana Department of Transportation has become involved in this particular case to see if these huge rather disconcerting signs violate the federal Highway Beautification Act. Yes, that’s a thing. The rancher who sold the land to build the park is quoted in the local newspaper as saying, “We have a First Amendment right to tell people about Jesus.”[1] So apparently even in this small, adorable town displaying the Ten Commandments rather ostentatiously on the side of the highway has become controversial.

When we hear about the Ten Commandments, similar situations may be the first thing we consider—all the arguments about where these Biblical tenants can be displayed. UCC Minister Kate Matthews Huey sums this up perfectly, “From time to time, the Ten Commandments provoke a measure of controversy in our public life: not about whether we actually obey them and keep them at the heart of our life together, or how they might change the way we live if we observed them. Now, that would be an excellent controversy. No, our national argument has been about their display, engraved (ironically) in stone and practically worshipped not even for their content but for the message they are assumed to convey, that we are a nation under God, specifically, in the Judeo-Christian tradition.”[2]

It’s understandable that we may hear the Ten Commandments in Progressive Christian circles and start feeling antsy because we may immediately consider how they are worshipped as a monument to the Judeo-Christian ideals some folks believe we must lift up in our national life as we have become a more secular society. You had better believe that folks who are insistent that the wording of the Pledge of Allegiance remains “one nation under God” are sometimes just as passionate that the Ten Commandments should have a place someplace in our national landscape. That message came home to me loud and clear as Maureen and I drove right past God’s Ten Commandments Park this summer.

Now some of us may wish for God to stay in the Pledge or the Ten Commandments to not be pushed out of the public sphere. Others may firmly believe that it’s not appropriate anymore in

a nation as diverse as America to seemingly prioritize Judaism and Christianity. Here's the thing, no matter what we think individually, we do need to talk about the Ten Commandments in Progressive Christianity and understand why they are so important from an ethical standpoint. Because the Ten Commandments are too noteworthy and remarkable to just ignore simply because their display in our modern American context may make us uncomfortable or not!

What about what Kate Matthews Huey said? That the excellent controversy would be discussing whether we actually obey them and how they could fundamentally change the way we live if we did. So let's get into it. What are these commandments? Worship God alone. Don't make any images of God. Don't take God's name in vain. Remember the Sabbath, keep it holy. Honor your parents. Don't murder anyone. If you're married, don't cheat on your spouse. Don't steal. Don't bear false witness against your neighbor. And no coveting your neighbor's house, spouse, animals, stuff in general.

You know, I looked all week for escape clauses and oh just kidding lines, but they're not really part of the Ten Commandments. I've said it before, these are called the Ten Commandments and not the Ten Suggestions for a reason. This language could make us nervous in the United Church of Christ. We are a denomination of soft verbs. If you read General Synod Resolutions, that's the National Body of the UCC that gathers every other year to make important decisions as our unified national Church, you will read "General Synod encourages." Or "General Synod recommends." If we start getting real crazy, it's "General Synod urges." And if we want to basically drop the microphone and walk off the stage dramatically, "General Synod strongly urges." Crazy, I know. We are a Christian denomination that quite literally has suggestions and not commandments in our church life together. In New England Congregationalism, it's a very simple idea that goes back hundreds of years—basically, don't you dare tell us what to do, thanks.

But here's the Good News of the Ten Commandments. Yes, there is a whole lot of Good News! These commandments are presented as a gift from God to help God's people structure our life together. If you notice, four of them deal with how we relate to God. And six of them deal with how we relate to each other. We don't need to read them as God wagging God's finger at us. Cynthia Rylant's poem "God woke up" expresses this idea well. Rylant imagines God in human form throughout her collection and paints the scene that God wakes up one morning and is really groggy. So God got a big cup of coffee and goes to sit outside under an apple tree. And "God sat there drinking His coffee, listening to the birds, when all of a sudden it hit Him. He was happy. God was HAPPY! And He wished there was just someone to see it." [3]

The Ten Commandments are meant to show us how we can be happy as God is happy. They are meant to give us some structure, to give us some guidance, to let us know how we can live lives worthy of the God who saves us time and again and calls us to live in covenant with God. What we see here is a way to help us flourish in life.

If we want to live fulfilling lives—we honor and love God, honor and love our families, honor and love our neighbors, honor and love ourselves. That's not doom and gloom, it's hard to do, but these teachings apply to all of us. That's not something that only belongs to one part of the Christian family. These are ethical instructions for how we live with God and each other. The Ten Commandments don't need to be a burden to follow, for they can be a gift that can help us lead amazing lives. Wouldn't it really be an excellent controversy if we spoke about the Ten Commandments in terms of whether we actually obey them and how it would fundamentally change our lives individually and collectively if we actually took them to heart?

When we think about this further, we hear how we're supposed to be in relationship with God first. Because the way we are in relationship with God helps us to be in good relationship with

those we love. If we love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, it gets a little easier to love our neighbors and our families and our friends and ourselves. Duke University's Craig Kocher says simply, "Good theology is good ethics." [4]

In the end, it's easy to read the Ten Commandments and think of God angry, thundering, causing smoke and lightning on the mountain, and scaring the people half to death with God's tirades about how we are supposed to behave. But what if we read the commandments as God's gifts—to help us be as happy as God sitting under that apple tree drinking that wonderful cup of coffee in the morning and simply loving life? What if we read these amazing ethical teachings as the way we can be in relationship with God and each other, and how we can get so much joy out of life if we actually followed them? May it be so, Amen.

[1] Jim Mann, "'To Glorify God' — Group Creates Ten Commandments Park on U.S. 2, The Daily Inter Lake, <http://m.dailyinterlake.com/members/to-glorify-god-group-creates-ten-com...>

[2] Kate Matthews Huey, "God's Loving Wisdom/Words of Life," UCC Weekly Seeds, October 5, 2014.

[3] Cynthia Rylant, God got a dog.

[4] Craig Kocher, Pastoral Perspective of Exodus 20:1-17, Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2, 76.