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Exodus 20:1-17

COMMUNITY STANDARDS

Unless there are rules and unless people follow the rules, chaos will reign. That was made abundantly clear in the recent presidential debate. But this is also true in every part of our lives. Rules and laws, regulations and standards all function to help communities run smoothly and fairly and safely. They provide order. And while adhering to rules and regulations may not always be fun or convenient or inexpensive, we are usually pragmatic enough to understand their necessity in life. So we follow the rules and go through the steps needed to obtain a driver's license or to register our vehicle. We understand the necessity for regulations for building houses or bridges or for ensuring food safety. We generally obey the rules of the road and very few of us will break into our neighbor's house to take their big screen TV. Rules and laws are a necessity for society.

For the Israelite people, however, the law given to Moses, what we call the 10 Commandments, was not viewed as simply a necessity for society, but was regarded as a treasured gift. They saw the Law, those 10 Commandments, as a treasured gift given to them by God.

The reason the people regarded the 10 Commandments as a source of joy and delight had everything to do with the context of their situation. The Israelites, as we may recall, were newly escaped from slavery in Egypt. During their enslavement, these people experienced the indignities and sufferings that come from forced labor and being regarded as someone's property. They knew what it felt like to be treated as a mere commodity and to have their humanity devalued. Indeed, their very bodies bore the scars of the whips and the beatings.

But God helped these enslaved people escape. And at the time of our reading today, these former slaves were free! They were free from their captors and free from their oppression and free to begin a brand new life.

And to help them begin this brand new life, God gave them the 10 Commandments. The 10 Commandments offered this recently liberated people a way to live and organize their lives that offered protection from the abuses and oppressive practices they had themselves endured. The Commandments ensured that they would live as those who honored their relationship with God, and not just any God but the God of liberation, the God who was on the side of the oppressed and vulnerable. The Commandments begin with a call for the people to remember what God had done for them. God says to them, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." Living in right relationship with God involved humility and gratitude to the God who rescued them. And it meant loyalty and faithfulness to this God who cares for the oppressed.

The Commandments also ensured that the people would live as those who honored their relationships with one another. As former slaves, their lives had been considered cheap and expendable. Back in Egypt, one of them could be killed or abused and no one in authority would care. But under the rules of the Commandments, the Israelite people would construct a different kind of society. *They* would honor other people's lives. As enslaved peoples who knew unrelenting labor, day after day after day, the Commandments gifted them with a wondrous day of rest and they were commanded to offer that day a rest to their own employees, and to the foreign workers in their community, and even to their own livestock. Fair labor practices, the care for the elderly, the honoring of covenants and relationships, and living in just ways with one another became the bedrock rules of their new life. And the people rejoiced. They could see that

these Commandments fostered freedom from all kinds of bondage. These Commandments fostered peace. These Commandments were life-giving. The Israelite people knew what society *could* look like and the terrible ways people could behave toward one another when there were no just rules or when those rules were not followed. They knew that without such community standards, chaos and darkness would ensue because they had experience that themselves.

On this World Communion Sunday, we celebrate the unity Christ makes possible among the diverse family of God's people. Unity and peace are our focus today. But let us not turn this into some kind of sentimental Kumbyah moment. True unity and peace are not easily achieved. True unity and peace take work and effort and commitment. And they depend upon adhering to basic community standards that involve living in right relationship with God and God's values and living in right relationship with one another.

Without such standards, chaos and darkness ensue. And we can see how in our current society the failure to uphold the standards expressed in the 10 Commandments has resulted in chaos and darkness. The Commandments forbid us from bearing false witness but we can see the distrust and division that come from people not telling the truth and how such falsehoods are especially dangerous in the midst of a pandemic—how lives are put at risk and how lives are lost when the truth is not told.

The Commandments instruct us to honor our father and mother, but we have witnessed how the elderly and other vulnerable populations have been exposed to grave danger by the handling of this pandemic, by the refusal of some to wear masks to protect others, and by the social and economic conditions that were permitted to exist prior to the pandemic.

The Commandments forbid theft, but we have seen that the rich play by different tax rules than ordinary folks. And we have seen how the refusal of leaders to deal with the realities

of climate change results in economic catastrophe for ordinary people who lose everything they have to fires, and hurricanes, and floods, and droughts.

The Commandments forbid using the Lord's name in vain, but we have observed the distortion of God's name by those using it as a political weapon and a photo opportunity in their quest for power.

The Commandments prohibit murder, but throughout our history and even to our present day, our nation has permitted and even sanctioned the taking of black lives by private citizens and public officials.

The Commandments instruct us to show fidelity to the God who liberates the oppressed, but we have turned our backs on this God when we have ignored the plight or outright supported policies that oppress the poor, and the migrant, and the marginalized.

God gave the 10 commandments as a gift, a gift to protect us from chaos and darkness. They were a gift given to foster peace and a gift given to create healthy communities. And yet, clearly, our society right now does not exhibit signs of being a healthy or peaceful community. When the standards of living faithfully with the God of the oppressed and living honorably with one another are abandoned, is it any wonder we find ourselves in a time of chaos and darkness?

While we can and should hold our public leaders accountable for living within our community standards, we also can and should hold ourselves accountable as well. Our behaviors reflect or detract from those standards by how we spend our money, by the words we speak, the choices we make with our time, by the jokes we tell and the friendships we make, by the social causes we invest ourselves in and by the way we vote. In order for us to realize the peace and unity that we all desire, let's follow the rules—the rules that honor the God of the oppressed, and the rules that honor our neighbor. Let's embrace the gift.