

**Rediscovering the Decalogue**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
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*Psalm 19, Exodus 19:1-6; 20:1-2*

Since we completed the fourth year of the narrative lectionary last week, we have the freedom to go out of the biblical order a bit. For today, and the next couple of weeks, we will be looking a little more closely at the Ten Commandments.

Most people today say that they believe the world would be better off if everyone just obeyed this list of rules. In fact, a recent poll indicated that 85% of Americans feel that way, even though the average person can only recite 3 out of the ten. But we are MCC, so our odds should be better than the general population! Let's try reciting them right now... please complete the following:

Commandment 1: You shall have...no other gods before me.

2: You shall not take...the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Commandment 3: You shall remember ... the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Commandment 4: Honor your ... father and mother.

Commandment 5: You shall not k ... kill.

Commandment 6: You shall not commit... adultery.

Commandment 7: You shall not st...steal.

Commandment 8: You shall not ... lie.

Commandment 9: You shall not covet your neighbor's ... wife.

Commandment 10: You shall not covet your neighbor's ... possessions.

These commandments have not substantially changed for the past 3400 years. Civilizations have changed. Knowledge has changed. Medicine has changed. Science and technology has changed. Politics and political systems have changed. Nations have changed. Government has changed.

And yet, human nature has not changed. People still worship various other gods in their lives. Today, 3400 years later, people still swear and curse (maybe even in that precious hour before church as we're trying to get our family out the door). People still don't find time to worship. People still have problems honoring their parents. Today, 3400 years later, people still murder, still commit adultery, still steal, still lie, still covet other peoples'

spouses or property. Change is all around us human beings, but has human nature changed? Not so much.

Are you familiar with Tuckman's stages of group development? This is a management theory developed in the mid-60's by Bruce W. Tuckman which states that a team goes through predictable stages of development. Although many people have written variations and enhancements to Tuckman's work, his descriptions of Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing still provide a useful framework for looking at how a group comes together, navigates conflict or disruption, settles in and (finally) thrives.

I hear the 10 commandments as the "norming" phase of group development. The people were formed as slaves in Egypt. They have stormed their way out of slavery and over the Red sea. It is time for them to "norm." If they are to be a blessing, as Abraham's promise has indicated, they must continue their development as a group so that they can move into the final phase, performing

The Israelites had been wandering in the desert for a long time. They were already children of the covenant, but they were still learning what it meant to really trust God. There was a definite pattern: at the first hint of adversity they turned on each other, their leadership and God. Eventually, when their crisis was solved, they learned to begrudgingly trust. Until the next major problem, when cycle would begin again. There had to be a better way. After a while of living like this, Moses climbed Mount Sinai to receive further instructions from God about how to live in a more long-term covenant.

Yahweh starts by reminding the people of the amazing deeds done on their behalf: *"I brought you out of Egypt; I heard your cries when you were slaves. I was the one who got you out even though you doubted me. I was the one who parted the sea for you to escape. I am the one who gave you food to eat and water to drink even though you all were just a bunch of doubting, whiny babies. Therefore you are going to do some things that are going to help you to remember always who to trust and how to get along with each other."*

It reminds me of my mother's rants when I'd get into trouble, "Jennifer Lynn, I didn't raise you to be a brat. I carried you for nine months, fed you, worked two jobs to help provide for you but I didn't go through all that just to have you turn out like this!"

Today, just displaying these rules may help us feel safer, down here at the base of the mountain, away from that fearsome, awe-filled nearness of God. Meanwhile, we go about our business of building our own little (manageable, and not too scary) idols to worship, knowing somewhere deep inside that these are not God at all. *No wonder we are so spiritually hungry.*

The first commandment was given at a time when the Israelites were perfectly aware of the other gods of the cultures around them. We assume that we've progressed past such "primitive" ways, ignoring the many idols that draw us toward them and away from being the people God has called us to be.

Walter Brueggemann writes powerfully of these temptations; *"In pursuit of joy, we may choose Bacchus; in pursuit of security, we may choose Mars; in pursuit of genuine love, we may choose Eros. It is clear that these choices are not Yahweh, that these are not gods who have ever wrought an Exodus or offered a covenant."* Bacchus, Mars, Eros: what good are they, indeed?

Jesus, when asked, summed up all these commandments into two great ones: To love God with one's whole being, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. This is an especially powerful message for us, in today's highly polarized and rancorous political partisanship and social climate, when we're trying to figure out how to live one with one another, and how to witness to our core values, believing them to be a wise and good foundation.

If we truly want to be faithful and obedient, if we truly want to be challenged to think and live creatively and generously, why do we see these laws, whether on stone or on our lips, as hemming us in rather than defining the way we organize our lives, both personally and communally?

Certainly the word "neighbor" appears enough times in this passage, and in the teachings of Jesus, to warrant our attention and careful reflection. It's understandable that so many of us cringe when we hear the word "political,"

*So what if our communal decision-making were thought of in "neighborly" terms, instead of "political" ones?*

Sometimes I think we in the United States romanticize the memory of a time not so long ago when neighbors looked after neighbors, when neighborhoods and communities were strong and blessed, aglow with the light of prosperity and friendliness.

*Have we lost that dream because we have forgotten who our neighbors are-- perhaps the most unexpected and surprising persons of all, just as Jesus told the story, and taught us the lesson?*

I suspect that we have always struggled with living that dream; our history is a long story that includes not only the highest ideals and aspirations but also prejudice, segregation, suspicion and slavery itself, all of which dehumanize and "de-neighbor" those we consider not deserving of respect, not wholly entitled to their fair share of God's abundant gifts.

*We do not love them as we love ourselves, as our present controversies illustrate, and that's a deep shame.*

We know, however, that we have the freedom to make a different choice, to shape and live in communities that embody God's love for all of God's children and for God's beautiful creation.

*Will we choose love and justice, healing and compassion when the world around us may do just the opposite?*

Honestly, wouldn't our communities of faith be more stable if our allegiance to God came first? Wouldn't we be able to meet the needs of our neighbors if we got rid of the idols that keep us too busy to be together in the first place? How would we be different to those we love if we were truly, deeply rested? And if we stopped gossiping, or if we didn't covet one another - our cars, homes, gadgets, jobs - what kind of church might we become?

I believe community life is better than an isolated one, but community life is harder. We might try and call it "advanced citizenship." You have to want to live in community because it doesn't come naturally; we have to work at it. An important part of working at it is living by norms.

Remembering our baptism, and who we are, and most importantly, who God is, up on that mountain, or down by the river, in the inner recesses of our hearts and in the life we share together, makes us grateful that God has given us these Ten Commandments, that we might find a path in our wildernesses of the present time. Even in the wilderness, we are never alone. Thanks be to God, Amen.