

“Keeping Covenants”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Edina Morningside Community Church; October 7, 2018

**Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17**

*Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him.*

*...Then God spoke all these words: 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. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

*Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

[Pastor Stacy Swain tells the story](#) of a communion Sunday last year when something unusual happened. In the midst of her sermon, a latecomer arrived, walking in a door at the front of the sanctuary. It was Harriet, a woman who had been coming to church for the past several months. Harriet lived on very little income and was sometimes homeless. Pastor Swain describes what happened next:

*As Harriet entered the sanctuary, the door shut loudly behind her. Several people glanced in her direction. ...She crossed the front of the sanctuary and was about to head down the center aisle to take a pew. Then the table caught her eye. Switching up her trajectory, she drew close to the table and began helping herself to the bread. She ate one piece, then another and another. I was still preaching, but the attention in the sanctuary had clearly shifted to Harriet. I felt everyone watching her and wondering what to do. After a couple of more minutes at the table, Harriet filled both of her hands with bread, made her way about halfway down the center aisle, and slipped into a pew.*

*I felt the congregation relax. I was almost finished with the sermon. But then—Harriet was up, again. She was making her way back to the table for more bread. At this point, one of our deacons—I’ll call her Brenda—slipped out of her pew and walked unhurriedly up to the table as well. Standing next to Harriet, Brenda wrapped her arm lovingly around Harriet’s shoulders. When Harriet was finished—when she had all the bread she needed—they turned together and walked slowly back to the pew, Harriet holding the bread in her hands and Brenda holding Harriet. Then they slid into the pew, side by side, together.*

Everyone knows there's a time and a place for communion, right? You only come forward when invited—when it's at that time when you're reading through the bulletin. And you only take a little bit of bread, and dip it in just a little bit of grape juice or wine. But Harriet didn't know or follow those unspoken rules. And by the grace of God, Brenda the usher met Harriet just as she was, rather than trying to impose an artificial expectation. What strikes me about this story is how Harriet and Brenda demonstrate the heart of communion, even while breaking the so-called "rules" of communion.

Sometimes we can lose a sense of the meaning behind laws, rules and practices. That can be the case with communion, which started out as a meal with Jesus and a dozen friends. But over the centuries it's become vitally important to say just these words, to follow X, Y, and Z liturgy, and to believe this-but-not-that about what the meal means. We have a tendency to lose the meaning in the motions. The liturgy of communion can become calcified, until it seems like a Harry Potter incantation that has to be done just so in order for the magic spell to work.

The same can be said for the Ten Commandments. There is superstition around this particular list of commands—so much that they're put up in courthouses and carried around as tattoos, as if making them visible will make those who gaze on them more righteous, will make the commandments immediately understandable and followable. Barbara Brown Taylor describes how throughout her part of the American South, people like to post the Ten Commandments on lawn signs in their yards.<sup>1</sup> She suggests that every lawn sign facing the street should be turned to face the house's occupants, so that the Commandments become less of a pious demonstration and more of a daily guide to faithful living, as they were originally intended.

The Ten Commandments can seem like merely a list of do's and don'ts—mostly don'ts—unless we realize they come in the greater context of God's covenant, which we heard at the very start of today's reading. God says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." That is the covenant with this God, who is described in many different ways throughout scripture but again and again as "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love". This is the God whose promise of protection, whose covenant of salvation for God's people, is the reality out of which Moses receives the Ten Commandments.

If God's divine love is the underlying principle, the Ten Commandments can become the policies of that principle. These commandments are ways to live with God and neighbors in light of the covenant. The first four concern how we relate with God: worshipping God alone, forsaking idols, honoring both God's name and God-given Sabbath. The other six deal with the rest of life, moving from God to society. Because God is love and calls us to show that love to one another, we honor parents, and don't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie or covet. What we know to be true about God pours forth in our actions with one another. Policies and practices follow the first principle, which is God's covenant to love and to liberate.

Some months ago here at Edina Morningside Church, we had a number of members start to wonder aloud and wonder together about our covenant together as a community. Particularly in this context of the #MeToo movement, countless stories of sexual harassment in the workplace, and the clergy abuse scandals of the Catholic church. All these led to the suggestion that we as a church don't necessarily have a concrete, collective list of core practices for a safer church. How do we offer safer church environment to the children who are downstairs, to those who gather in this sanctuary, and to the people from Monday through Saturday who pass through our doors? How do we offer a safer church?

Now when this has come up at other organizations or even other churches, there can be a tendency to create a 30-point list of all the dos (and mostly don'ts) of forming a safer church. It may be that this is on

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Exodus 20:1-17—Homiletical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 77.

the horizon for us, and we'll together come to a sense of that. But I'm especially proud that before we got to any of that, we began with the core principle of love, of community, and of remembering what calls us together in the first place. So, in a moment we're going to speak aloud a draft covenant, a behavioral covenant of how we are to be together. What God might be calling us into—forming a safer church with one another. Not just a covenant with God from millennia ago, but how God is calling us to form a new covenant with one another here and now. Whatever commandments—if you will—proceed from this covenant will help us live it out in faithful ways, but we start with the most important thing first. We start with naming the core of our identity, our covenant with God and our relationships with one another. Together in light of this covenant, and all that will come out of it, we will recognize ways to form a community that continues to be a place that respects each of us who come as we are—as God has made us, calling us to create a community of belonging rather than just fitting in or conforming.

That is the point of communion in the first place. That's the point that Harriet and Brenda showed us by their example. Come to the table as you are; come to the church as you are. Come in order to show love for one another, receive love for yourself, and be empowered by God to be sent forth into the world. That is how Jesus summed up the whole of the commandments. When he was asked “what does this all mean?”, he summed up the Ten Commandments and the hundreds of others that are in the Torah, saying, “Love God, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.” That is the heart of this communion, this covenant of love, God's covenant with each of us, and our covenant with one another. So that all many truly feel welcome, all may participate here and everywhere—of every age, background, race and creed—gathered together worldwide in this communion of Christian faith, by the grace of God. Amen.