

We Make the Road by Walking
The Ten Commandments: Rules for the Long Road
Exodus 20:1-17

One of my favorite writers on Christian faith is Frederick Buechner, and I go back to his books over and over again. One of them is called *The Wizard's Tide*. It's fiction, but it's also a memoir of his experience of his father's suicide when he was ten years old. Buechner talks in that book about how much he loved the *Wizard of Oz* books when he was a child. In one of those *Oz* books, he says, there's an old man who knew a magic word that could change anything into something else, if you only knew how to pronounce the word: PYRZQXGL

And of course Teddy, the little boy in *The Wizard's Tide*, couldn't pronounce that word any more than we can. But he tried. He laid awake in his bed at night, trying every pronunciation he could think of, because even though he knew it was just a story, what if it did work? What if somehow he stumbled on the right combination of sounds, and saying it out loud actually did have the magical power to change his life?

Unless we've given up entirely, I think all of us are secretly looking for that one thing that might change our lives. Wondering, even though we know better, if there isn't just that one word, one practice or discipline or relationship, one thing we could do better at, that would fix our broken places, make us happy, let us be *sure* we're on the right path, headed in the right direction.

I think this is how some people look to the Ten Commandments. Every so often, usually not in California, a controversy breaks out about putting the Ten Commandments on a monument out in front of a courthouse, or posting them on the wall of every schoolroom in America. There's a sort of superstition that those laws are like a magic symbol, or maybe like an umbrella to protect us from the storm: if we just huddle together underneath it, we'll all be fine.

That may or may not be a good idea. But even for less traditional people, there's still great value in these rules of life. Here they are again, with just a little contemporary interpretation:

1. Put the God who wants you to be free *first*, so that you remember not to slip back into slavery to all those other things that can have power over us: fear, worry, alcohol, food, control.
2. Don't reduce God to the manageable size of an idol that can be used to justify your own agendas.
3. Don't throw God's name around as though it has no value. If you make a vow in God's name, keep it!
4. Take a day off and give everybody else a day off too. Resist the culture's imperative toward acquiring more and more—that drive that makes everyone work like a slave.
5. Turn away from your own self-centeredness. Honor your parents...and all the people who made you what you are.
6. Don't kill people, and don't do the things that incite violence, *like*
7. ...Cheating on your most intimate relationships, or

8. ...Stealing other people's possessions, or
9. ...Lying about other people's character or behavior.
10. In fact, if you really want to avoid violence, you have to deal with its root cause: uncontrolled desire, *envy* of what you see and don't have. Don't let yourself be a slave to wanting more.

The magic of the Ten Commandments, I think, is that there's some concreteness to them. They seem to tell people exactly what to do, how to behave, what to avoid. It's a complicated world. So many things that we would like to be black and white seem to be tinged with gray. And so we long for some clarity, some rule of thumb that will make order out of chaos.

What's moral and ethical and *right* ought to be very clear—don't you think? When I was graduating from law school and taking the bar exam, they were just instituting the professional ethics part of that test. I remember that my classmates and I were pretty cavalier about that piece of the exam. "*Ethics!*" we thought. I know how to do that. I'm a good person; I know what's right and wrong. This will be a piece of cake. But it wasn't. Darned if it wasn't one of the hardest parts of that test, full of questions that had no answer I could come up with by using my personal sense of morality.

The truth is, even the Ten Commandments don't give us what we need to answer all the questions or to lead us into the right decisions all the time--unless we are willing to think hard about them, to keep interpreting them for answers to the questions that are dilemmas for us now. We know the commandment "do not kill". But does that mean that we should not be at war against terrorists like ISIS? Doesn't it mean that capital punishment is wrong? Does it mean that every medical procedure at our disposal must be taken to keep people alive as long as possible? "You shall not steal," the commandment says. Are we stealing from somebody when we throw away in this country 40% of the food that is produced, while many, many people around the world go hungry? The moral and ethical issues of our day are complicated. Their answers are not obvious. Even the Ten Commandments require our thoughtful, and humble, interpretation.

We make a mistake if we see the commandments as simply a set of instructions for living a well-ordered, law-abiding life. The value of the commandments is not just as a set of rules. It's in their ability to shape us into the kind of people who can make moral decisions. This is as true for us as it was for the first people who heard Moses read them off of those stone tablets at the foot of Mt. Sinai. What was important about this set of laws for the people of Israel was that they were *God's* laws. They weren't about the personal agenda of a king who might one day die or be voted out of office, or choose a different set of people to be kind to. They weren't made up by people like us, who have a tendency to romanticize the past and catastrophize the present. They weren't about just this week, or this year. This was the covenant, the set of promises that would bind this people to their God and to one another for the long road they were walking on together.

I think it's important to note that this covenant is focused on conduct—how you act, what you *do*—because God knew—God has always known—that what you *do* has the power to change who you are. That often the transformation of our hearts begins with the steps we take first with our feet, the direction we turn and point ourselves in.

In my first weeks in this new place, I turned on Google Maps almost every time I got in the car. Every place I went was new to me, so I needed the guidance of whoever that woman is who talks to me through my phone. In those first few weeks, she would often say to me, very politely, “Make a U turn as soon as possible.” Now I need her less. I don’t ask her for directions when I’m going someplace familiar—the grocery store, or the church, or downtown Campbell. I’ve begun to internalize the map of this area, directions to the places I want to go (although I still find Saratoga Avenue a complete mystery). That’s what we do with the information that’s most important to us, the knowledge we need to keep at our fingertips: we internalize it. The best use of the Ten Commandments is not to put them on a wall; it’s to put them in our hearts, to practice them until we hear their voice inside of us, until we become *the kind of people* who hear God’s voice even when the GPS system is not on.

Maybe that’s what Jesus was thinking about when someone asked him, “What’s the most important commandment?” “Love,” he said. “Love God; love other people.” If you can only remember one thing; if you want one rule that covers every situation—remember this: love. And then Jesus went on to show us what that love looks like. He lived in a way that demonstrated the kind of love he was talking about: showing as much kindness and generosity to the unlovable as he did to his family and friends, standing up for what was right even at great cost to himself, being true to his relationship with God every day, no matter what else happened.

In a way, I think putting the Ten Commandments up next to Jesus’ great commandments to love God and love one another is like getting two alternate routes on our GPS system. If you’re someone who needs and find guidance in a set of concrete rules, follow those commandments until they sink deep into you, and they will get you where you need to go. For people who learn by watching and imitating another person, walking in their footsteps until their life becomes yours, follow Jesus. Either route will get you where you need to go...because both paths point us toward living with reverence, honoring human relationships and responsibility, justice and honesty, authenticity and simplicity. Both routes are about living in the fullness of life and about making that life possible for every person and all of creation.

The goal is something more than not breaking the rules. It’s about changing our outsides until our insides are changed too. It’s about our becoming—individually and as a people together—more and more like the one in whose image we were created.