

Foundational  
United Church of Broomfield  
October 8, 2023

Exodus 20:1-20 (NRSVue)

Then God spoke all these words,

<sup>2</sup>“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup> you shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup>“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. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or serve 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 [hate] me <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup>“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.

<sup>8</sup>“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup>“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup>“You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup>“You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup>“You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup>“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup>“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

<sup>18</sup> When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid<sup>[d]</sup> and trembled and stood at a distance <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”<sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.”

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The cereal aisle has got to be one of the most amazing expressions of ingenuity in American culture. For centuries the only way to eat grains was as a big, sloppy bowl of gluey glop (gruel, oatmeal, bulgur, cream-of-

wheat, porridge). Then a little over a hundred years ago some nineteenth century health food nuts got the idea to toast up those grainy tidbits and the cold cereal phenomenon was born.

Now we look down a never-ending supermarket aisle, at floor to ceiling cereals that offer crunch, sugar, extra-fiber, nuts, fruits, marshmallows, peanut butter, references to movies, shows and toys, along with every color of the rainbow, and every size, shape, and texture imaginable. Could Mr. Kellogg ever have imagined such a thing? When it comes to breakfast cereal, we seem to have no problem embellishing upon the way in which we refuel our body for the start of a new day.

So why is it that in other areas of life we're so stingy with our creativity? Why are so many unwilling to try coloring outside established lines? Too often we're content to conclude that there's no more room at the inn for our faith to expand and be challenged to greater insights and grander hopes.

Pastor and writer, Erwin McManus has suggested looking at the Decalogue, The Big Ten, in a whole different way. Instead of looking at this list of do's and don'ts as the highest possible rung human beings may strive to reach on creation's ladder, he suggests that "The Ten Commandments are the lowest possible standard of humane living."

It's not that the behaviors ordered by God to the Israelites in the wilderness aren't commendable. It's not that The Decalogue isn't an excellent guide for human justice. It's just that the Ten Commandments aren't heaven's standards. We're working to be better, not perfect.

McManus notes: "They are not God's attempt to pull us up beyond the human into the spiritual. The Ten Commandments are the lowest possible standard of humane living. Stop and consider what they demand of us. Maybe it would help if we rephrased them in everyday language. Here goes: 'Hey, could you stop killing each other? Oh, yeah, by the way, could you not steal each other's stuff? And it would be really helpful if you wouldn't lie to each other, either. And here's a thought, could you not take other people's husbands and wives and just, sort of, like keep your own?'"<sup>1</sup>

It's bad enough that we need to be told these words. After all, do we really forget to put our shoes on before leaving the house for work? Or forget that we need to eat? Or overlook the fact that the bathtub faucet is still running? Of course not, those behaviors are just common sense, sheer survival skills, everyday coping mechanisms.

But our moral/ethical common sense seems to be depressing, especially when watching or reading the news and seeing what humanity is doing. We read the Ten Commandments and think they offer the be-all and end-all for human achievement. We put them on our walls and even in some of our judicial chambers.

But in reality, God is giving us nice soft, mushy oatmeal. The easiest stuff that we can get down with our baby-teeth character and infantile spirit. The Ten Commandments aren't representative of the best we can be. They are representative of the least we can expect from each other and still remain human. Are we anywhere near ready to see the whole breakfast cereal long aisle of possibilities that God has available for us?

Again, McManus declares that "Anything below these standards is choosing to live like an animal, a barbarian. The Ten Commandments don't call us to the extraordinary spiritual life; they call us to stop dehumanizing one another. The law is the minimum of what it means to be human. The reason the law condemns us isn't because of our inability to live up to an extraordinary measure. Humanity repeatedly demonstrates that it

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<sup>1</sup> Erwin McManus, *An Unstoppable Force* [Group Publishing, 2000]

couldn't even pass the test with a D. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, God was establishing a Godly nation. God was giving them the tools to form an ethos that, through honoring God, would result in the nurturing and elevation of the human spirit."<sup>2</sup>

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Fifty years ago in 1953, James Watson and Francis Crick walked into their local pub in Cambridge, England to make a stunning lunchtime announcement: They had discovered "the secret of life," the chemical structure of DNA.

Today all of us are familiar with the beautiful, sinuous, swirling "double-helix" model of DNA's complex structure. Watson and Crick managed to unsnarl that swirl, breaking down the chemical composition of these building blocks for life. Since then, scientists have managed to follow that double helix and create a rough draft of the human genome--the map of our genetic structure, a blue-print of humanity.

Or have they?

In truth it seems now that the more we know about the structure of DNA, the more we know that it's only the base, the beginning, the rudiments. As Natalie Angier puts it in a New York Times article, "DNA, on its own, does nothing. It can't make eyes blue, livers bilious or brains bulging."<sup>3</sup>

In our search for the secret of life we first thought we'd find the answers in the physical structure and chemical composition of DNA. Then we thought if we knew the DNA formula for each gene, we'd have it licked. Now we're just beginning to understand that it is all about proteins, NOT genes.

According to Angier, DNA "holds bare-bones information--suggestions, really--for the construction of the proteins of which all life forms are built, but that's it. DNA can't read those instructions, it can't divide, it can't keep itself clean or sit up properly--proteins that surround it do all those tasks. Stripped of context within the body's cells, those haggling florid ecosystems of tens of thousands of proteinaceous fauna, DNA is helpless, speechless--DOA."

When God confronted the Israelites in the wilderness and laid out for them the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue of life, God was providing us with a spiritual blueprint for a human being.

The commandments spiral around each other, bringing a right relationship with God into a graceful dance with a right relationship with all our personal relationships. There are twin spines to the double helix. There are twin spines to the double helix called the Decalogue. The twin spines of God's commandment double helix entwine the six commandments toward God around with the last four commandments towards the neighbor.

But just because we can see the strong, righteous, flexible structure these commandments create doesn't mean we've got the secret to life. Like Watson and Crick, like all the human genome scientific pioneers, covenant people are spiritual pioneers, and we're just scratching the surface of what it means to be human. The commandments don't give us an exhaustive list of right attitudes and good behaviors. They point us in God's direction and keep us attuned to the divine.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> (Natalie Angier, "Not Just Genes: Moving Beyond Nature vs. Nurture," The New York Times ("Science Times"), 25 February 2003, F1.

If we don't get the basics right, if we don't build our lives on this firm foundation that makes us humane, we jeopardize living as fully as God is calling us to live.

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The psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi was a disciple of Sigmund Freud. He identified a disorder he called Sunday neurosis. Today we call it workaholism. But it alludes to a condition that people today are having: the lack of Sabbath. When we fail to find the rhythm of life that embraces both work and play, both labor and leisure, both breathing out and breathing in, lives go out of whack and we get ill – physically, mentally, spiritually. The Sabbath keeps our workaholism in check. And the Sabbath is more than just not working.

In her article, [Bring Back the Sabbath](#), Judith Shulevitz says that the Jewish invention of the Sabbath "invented the idea of social equality. The Israelite Sabbath institutionalized an astonishing, hitherto undreamed-of notion: that every single creature has the right to rest, not just the rich and privileged. Covered under the Fourth Commandment are women, slaves, strangers and, improbably, animals."<sup>4</sup>

Because God rested, and we're created Imago Dei (in the image of God), "we rest in order to honor the divine in us, to remind ourselves that there is more to us than just what we do during the week . . . The Sabbath is to the week what the line break is to poetic language. It's the silence that forces you to return to what came before to find its meaning."<sup>5</sup>

What was creation's climactic culmination? The act of stopping. Why should God have considered it so important to stop? Rabbi Elijah of Vilna put it this way: God stopped to show us that what we create becomes meaningful to us only once we stop creating it and start to think about why we did so.

Judith Shulevitz ends her article with these words: "We have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember."<sup>6</sup>

This morning we stop to remember the Ten Commandments, not the highest peaks of spiritual achievement, but the basic DNA of all life, a life that we share with all creation. Or to put it in words that come from the Psalm reading for today, the Ten Commandments are the rock and bedrock on which every life must be built. "May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

AMEN

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/02/magazine/bring-back-the-sabbath.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.