

Haydenville Congregational Church
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Exodus 20:1-17

“No Grabbing Toys”

*Come Holy Spirit! Come and bless us all.
Fill the hearts of your faithful,
and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.*

My son Sasha is now 24 years old. When he was a boy, we made a big deal about family dinners together at the dining room table. The meal started with a little prayer. Before anyone could take a bite, we would take hands, bow our heads (well, some of us bowed our heads) and I would say a prayer. It was an important family ritual (well, some of us thought it was an important family ritual).

When Sasha was about six, I told him that he had to start thinking about prayers to say before dinner because his turn was coming up soon—he was going to be asked to offer a prayer. When I told him he made a face. Eventually I put my foot down and said it was really his turn to say a prayer before we ate.

With great solemnity, we took hands and Sasha—eyes closed and looking surprisingly reverential—said these words:

*No guns.
No bombs.
No grabbing toys.*

I thought it was a good prayer. It summed up my feelings precisely. Short, to the point, direct, understandable...it hit all the right notes...no guns, no bombs, no grabbing toys.

Sasha's six-year-old prayer reflects the values we had been trying to impress upon him. He grew up in the home of two peace and justice activists. He had been taught directly and indirectly to value peace, and to oppose guns and bombs. The “no grabbing toys” was an extra bonus—we had not been sure he heard us when we stressed that part.

As children grow, we try to teach them the values that the family and the community hold dear. We want to transfer to our children—from our hearts, faith and experiences—what matters most to us. We hope they will internalize those values and express them in their own lives.

The Ten Commandments reflect this same spirit of transferring to loved ones what essential values are held dear and what are the best ways to behave. Prior to the exodus, prior to being liberated by Moses and crossing the Red Sea to freedom, the Hebrew people lived in Egypt for 400 years. Much of that time they were enslaved by the Pharaoh and made to do back-breaking work and endure abuse. As slaves, the Hebrew people suffered terribly. They were exploited and lived without free will or independence.

One of the many horrors of slavery is that it does not simply enslave a person's body, it enslaves a person's mind. Slavery makes a person serve and obey, and it colonizes a person's mind and makes them act subservient and docile in order to survive.

The Hebrew people had been enslaved in Egypt for generations, they had suffered profoundly and their spirits had inevitably been broken. Once liberated by Moses and wandering through the wilderness together, they had to learn how to be free people, how to live in community, how to behave and interact, how to take care of one another. They needed guidance, limits, rules and an understanding of what enhanced the common good. The Hebrew people were a tribe of people; they had to be nurtured, groomed and prepared to be a nation of people—people who honored their God, lived harmoniously with each other, followed laws, and took good care of each other.

God gave the Hebrew people the Ten Commandments to strengthen them, to help them develop from a loosely-knit group of former slaves to a community with a common core, shared values and principles. It is no accident that there are **Ten** Commandments—think of the fingers on both hands. The commandments were part of the oral tradition, even though Moses supposedly carried tablets down from Mount Sinai. The choice of ten may have been rooted in the idea that people can commit to memory about ten things.

And so what Ten Commandments did God give to the Hebrew people to help them coalesce and live in community? To answer that question, I went to our Children's Church materials...we use the "Godly Play" Montessori curriculum in Children's Church.

With “Godly Play,” Bible stories are acted out with little wooden people and objects. The “Godly Play” lesson for the Ten Commandments is called “The Ten Best Ways.” What great reframing...because the commandments ARE the ten best ways to be in relationship with God, and with each other.

The Ten Commandments lesson is contained in this heart-shaped box. The theme of the Commandments is summarized by the first three blocks...they say “Love God,” “Love People” and “God Loves Us.” (Notice that when put together those three blocks also form a heart.)

Then each commandment has its own little stone or tablet. The first four commandments are aimed at establishing a right relationship between God and God’s people. It is interesting that the first commandment—in the “Godly Play” lesson: “Don’t serve other Gods”—does not appear to deny the reality of other gods worshiped by other people. In ancient times, there were many other gods worshiped by many other tribes. This first commandment says essentially: I am your God, you are my people, and I want total allegiance. Nothing should come between God and God’s people.

The second commandment, “Make no idols to worship,” prohibits creating images of God. God does not want to be made small, localized, concretized and easy to be manipulated.

The third commandment, “Be serious when you say my name,” stands in the shadow of the first and the second. This is also an attempt to forestall manipulation of God by magical or other improper uses of the divine name. In ancient times, people used oaths and invocations to harness divine power to serve human needs. This commandment says: my name is holy, don’t use it lightly, be serious when you say my name.

The fourth commandment, “Keep the Sabbath holy,” spring out of an allegiance to God the Creator. The Sabbath is not presented as a day of worship, but rather as a day of cessation blessed by God’s own rest. Rest is written into the very nature of things, into the rhythm of life and the ways of worship. In encountering the Creator on the Sabbath, the Hebrew people could recover a right relationship with God’s created order.

The remaining six verses of the Decalogue (that’s what the Ten Commandments are also called), offer imperatives that regulate relationships between persons within the family of God.

The fifth commandment, “Honor your mother and father,” is the only one of the ten which is attached to a promise or a pledge. Addressed not to children but to adults, this law does two important things....it elevates the status of women by placing the mother on the same level as the father, AND it protects the community by insuring the uninterrupted flow of traditions from generation to generation.

The sixth commandment, “Don’t kill,” is often translated as “You shall not murder.” This commandment is aimed at that form of killing in ancient Israel that was considered socially unacceptable, namely homicide. The ancient people did not consider warfare, capital punishment, or even revenge killing to be threatening to the existence of the community, as long as restraining rules were followed. So this commandment is aimed at homicide.

The seventh commandment, “Godly Play” says “Don’t break your marriage,” tries to preserve family integrity and the inevitable question of the legitimacy of children. This law aims at insuring that the transmission of the family legacy, including property, to the true heirs proceeds without question or interruption. In ancient times, it was understood that some forms of sexual activity outside of marriage were not forbidden by this commandment, including polygamous relationships with concubines and slaves. But even with that caveat, this commandment is meant to convey that in the primary marital relationship, men and women were expected to be faithful.

The eighth commandment, “Don’t steal,” is meant to protect private property which is a fundamental matter of interest and source of security to a community. This commandment was even meant to include protection against unjust claims of eminent domain by kings. However, this commandment was NOT meant to preclude one practice that was part of the social safety net for poor people...the practice of gleaning. Gleaning is when farmers left a corner of their fields un-harvested, and poor people came and helped themselves. “Thou shalt not steal,” did not apply to gleaning which was considered an honorable tradition and an act of generosity by the land owner—one that aided the entire community.

The ninth commandment, “Don’t lie,” is a bulwark not only against trivial lying but against perjury in court. If those who are falsely accused and those who are vulnerable cannot have recourse to impartial judges who receive accurate information from credible witnesses, then all of society is at risk.

And the final commandment, which “Godly Play” summarizes as “Don’t even want what others have,” moves the members of the covenant community beyond

banned public acts to that private and inner moral condition that can threaten community interest. Like many Hebrew verbs, the verb “to covet” includes an element of enactment. The word in Hebrew means to look with deep desire upon someone else’s belongings and begin to rehearse in one’s mind how to acquire that for oneself.

The “Godly Play” lesson is right to boil all the commandments down to the three blocks they put on the top of the box, “Love God,” “Love People,” and “God Loves Us.” And the creators of the “Godly Play” curriculum are also right to call this lesson “The Ten Best Ways,” meaning the ten best ways for God to guide people’s relationship with God and teach them how to live in community.

The Ten Commandments are thorough and compelling, AND they reflect the time in which they were written and the people they were written for. And so today, in 2012, I wonder: what would we write if we were to write ten commandments to teach people how to love God and live in community? Would we write the same original Ten Commandments?

Our children and their teachers in Children’s Church took up this question and wrote their own Ten Best Ways for living in community, specifically in Children’s Church. This is what they came up with:

1. Listen to teachers and respect sacred time
2. Respect others’ space
3. Listen during lesson and do not leave circle without permission
4. Have one conversation at a time
5. Notice and respect others’ feelings
6. Be respectful of your work and others’ work
7. Talk TO others, not about them
8. Honor differences and be welcoming
9. Do your best
10. Look for peaceful solutions

Pretty fabulous list. (Imagine if the Democrats and Republicans in Congress followed those rules. Imagine if world leaders around the globe followed those rules.)

Our beloved children wrote those ten best ways so they could thrive in Children’s Church....what ten best ways might we write for our lives and our church community?

Would ours sound like the original Ten Commandments that Moses received on Mount Sinai? Would they be more like the ones our kids wrote in Children's Church?

Here, just to get us thinking, are some contemporary Ten Commandments that I wrote that could guide us as people of God in community together:

- I. Love God profoundly, with everything you've got.
- II. Don't put God in a box, make God small, or take away God's mysterious power and strength.
- III. Allow yourself to rest—regularly nourish and nurture yourself so God can completely fill an empty, healthy place inside you.
- IV. Honor your family, both the family you know AND the global family filled with siblings you have not yet met.
- V. Do not harm one another in any way. Never use violence.
- VI. Cherish and protect your beloved partner, being faithful and loving always.
- VII. Do not take what is not yours or eye what others have with envy.
- VIII. Speak the truth.
- IX. Care for God's creation, be loving, attentive stewards of this good earth.
- X. Recognize that we are interdependent, including all humans, all creatures, and this living planet.

Those are not too shabby...but I'll bet YOU could write Ten Commandments that were more creative and more encompassing. The point is not that the ten best ways be perfect and inspiring...the point is that they be real and shape and guide God's people to love God, be faithful to God and to each other in community.

Mine are just ideas to get YOUR creative juices flowing...I wonder what commandments YOU would write.

Oh! and...P.S. just because of who I am, I might be tempted to add commandments 11, 12 and 13. Those additional three commandments would be: no guns, no bombs, no grabbing toys.

Amen.