

The Voice of Accountability

Exodus 20: 1-21

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.

At grandma's house, hanging on one of her walls was a plaque with the Ten Commandments on it. There they all were carefully etched into the gold plating. As a young child, I would look up at the commandments hearing the voice of a tightly wound God who was wagging their parental finger at me— "Thou shall honor thy father and thy mother!" "Thou shall not speak the Lord's name in vein!" "Thou shall not covet your little brother's toys!" Perhaps we grew up projecting the same finger-wagging tone into God's voice. It makes me wonder how Moses and the Israelites heard the commandments that day at Mount Sinai. It also makes we wonder how we still hear them today.

Maybe we hear them as God's original laws. After all, humanity has the unique ability to organize ourselves flexibly in large groups. Our laws enable us to do so. Could you imagine cruising down I-40 choosing which side of the road was most convenient to drive on? Where we could peel around as fast as we felt like through school zones, and where stoplights were merely "suggestive"? It would be a dangerous mess. Or maybe we hear the tone of the commandments as God's house rules. As a kid we had house rules: no Saturday morning cartoons until the chores were finished. During the high school years there were more rules: curfew at 10:30pm. When I used the car I had to put gas into it. I even heard my father once exclaim, "If you're going to live in my house, you better follow my rules!" Some of the rules were established because it helped the household run smoothly. Others were spawned out of necessity—my poor father got sick and tired of getting into the car on Monday morning only to find the gas tank on empty! Even in Presbyterian church world we have a 200-page thick *Book of Order* to help keep us in check. Maybe we hear the commandments as God establishing law. Or perhaps we hear God saying, "If you want to live under my roof, you better follow my rules!"

Except chip away at the stone tablets and discover the Hebrew translates God's commands as, "The ten statements." Remember Judge Roy Moore who fought to keep a sculpture of the Ten Commandments in front of his courthouse? They monument weighted over two and a half tones, which equates to roughly 500 pounds per commandment. The ten statements aren't heavy stone-cold laws. They are the shape of our freedom. Listen again to how God begins the edict: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out...*of the house of slavery.*" You see, God frames the ten statements to a people who only knew systems of oppression. God is saying, "You may have lived and breathed in a system of perpetual busyness, the stress of meeting deadlines and quotas, but now you are free to rest and take a breath every seventh day. *You are not slaves to the system anymore.* Or you may have thought that politicians spreading lies against you and others was normal, but it is not. *You are not slaves to that system anymore.* Because I am the Lord your God who brought you out...*of the house of slavery.*" Perhaps we better understand the ten statements if we read them through the first sentence: "You shall not have other gods because I am the God who brought you out..." Or, "You shall not steal and murder, because I am the God who brought

you out...” They are statements about how to live as a community who is free at last to honor God and each other.

Still, however, let’s not take the sting entirely out of what is happening here. Within the boundaries of what it means to be a free community, there is also accountability. There is no such thing as living in community without there being a voice of accountability as well. There was a mother whose son had been growing more and more distant from the family. He had gotten into drugs and would stumble in at three or four ‘o clock in the morning. Some nights he wouldn’t come home at all. The longer the situation went on the more hostile and unsafe the situation became. One night while the rest of the family was having dinner, the son walked through the front door, scurried up the stairs and shut the door to his bedroom without saying a word. It was then the mother had had enough. She excused herself from the table, walked up the stairs, pushed open the door and said, “Now you listen to me. I love you so much, I’m not going to put up with this behavior anymore.” It’s the voice of loving accountability. Maybe it’s how God’s voice sounded on the mountain that day. Like a mother saying to her children “I love you too much to put up with behaviors that are destructive to yourself and others.” “I love you too much to put up with a society where it is easier to buy a gun than it is to cast a vote.” I love you too much to live in a world where racism and xenophobia outrank the virtues of justice and love.” It’s the voice of accountability.

At the conference I was just at, one of the headlining speakers spoke about the future church needing to lead the efforts for reparations—for repairing the history of free labor through slavery. Shortly after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, leaders of the black community realized that fighting for equal rights was not enough, they also needed equal resources. So the leaders wrote the Black Manifesto of 1969 to bishops and high councils of every denomination, demanding that white churches and synagogues pay reparations for Black enslavement . The document floated up to the top tier of our councils and then it vanished. Why? Because they had squashed it. The speaker said, “Here we have our own Christian sisters and brothers asking us to do something to repair the generational harm done by slavery, Jim Crow segregation, redlining, school-to-prison pipelines, economic disparities in every category, as well as physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological abuses, and the church’s response was to smother their efforts.” It was then you could hear the lament in her voice as she said, “It is sadly what happens when we are no longer held accountable to anyone but ourselves.” There is no such thing as being a community that is free without there being a voice that holds us accountable to what our freedom looks like.

This year, at Trinity, our leaders are focused on building community. They have taken vows that hold them accountable to God and to you. They have penned a new mission statement to help hold us all accountable to our collective purpose. The good news is that God loves us too much to put up with anything less than our being free and helping to set others free. And it is this freeing love that is the only thing truly written in stone.