

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Freedom First”
Thomas G. Speers, III
October 8, 2017

Lesson: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

The Ten Commandments. We were supposed to learn them in Sunday School, and some of us did. A few of us can actually come up with more than two or three of them. They are something we think we should know. Some people think they ought to be posted in courtrooms and classrooms; our Presbyterian forbears thought they ought to be read in worship on a very regular basis. Reinhold Niebuhr used to suggest that what we refer to as the fifth commandment, to honor your mother and father, ought to be suspended in adolescence since nobody did anyway. The commandments show up in corny jokes, like the one about the old chief who told the missionary that at his age he couldn't do any of the things that were prohibited, like committing adultery or stealing, so did that make him a Christian? Sometimes, because of our reading of Paul, they take second place to the Gospel. Paul liked to talk about the difference between Law and Gospel, where Gospel is clearly the more wonderful of the two. Yet, those who are particularly discerning know that these laws are Gospel at its very best. Before God asks anything of Israel, God first delivers them out of Egypt. As Professor Gene Tucker writes, “the law is given in the context of and with the precondition of God's grace. The people to whom these commandments are given have already been saved, quite literally, redeemed from slavery and chosen by God to be [God's] own.”¹ So before God asks anything of us, God first liberates us so that we can live by God's command. We are granted freedom first. Remember that, especially when you break these commandments, as we all of us do. The God who calls us to live by these words is also the God who forever saves us when we fail to do so and shows us another way to live. Before the law is given, God is already at work, granting freedom to all God's people.

Today I want to look at the first commandment: “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.” This is not only the first, it is also the most important commandment, and in a way all the other commandments flow from this first one. Follow this commandment and you will follow all the rest. This commandment recognizes that there are all kinds of other gods who grab our

¹ Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year A* © 1987 Abingdon Press.

attention and it calls us to reject them, to have no other gods before the God of Israel, the God Jesus called “Father.” It addresses our constant temptation to give our loyalty to that which is not God. I have a friend who speaks of the *God-shaped hole* that is inside every one of us and our tendency to fill that hole with that which is not God. At best this makes us restless, uneasy, or unfulfilled, and at worst, it makes us destructive. Many of you will know the wonderful words of Augustine: You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you, --until we have no other gods before you.

We all could come up with lists of those things that we idolize, that we place alongside or even ahead of God. Sometimes our sense of pride and patriotism is such that we cannot imagine that our country could ever be wrong or we forget that we are Christians first and Americans after that and we make an idol of our nation.

We’re all for supporting families, but sometimes in our zeal, we forget that not all families are the same and that is all right since God did not make us to be the same. Sometimes we can make an idol of our families.

I want to lift up two other idols today that are related to some of the other commandments. A great many people today make an idol out of money and possessions. They have become gods before God. By itself money isn’t bad, but the love of money, the constant striving after money, is the root of all kinds of evil. God desires to free us from slavery to the addiction of money. Bill Phillippe tells the story of a “church meeting where a very wealthy man rose to tell the rest of those present about his Christian faith. ‘I am a millionaire,’ he said, ‘and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I remember that turning point in my faith. I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I know that I only had that dollar bill in my pocket and had to either give it all to God’s work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar, everything I had, to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today.’

“He finished and there was an awed silence at his testimony as he moved toward his seat. As he sat down, a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over to him and said, ‘I dare you to do it again.’”² The Psalms proclaim that the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, but how many of us actually live that way? How many of us are holding other gods before God: gods of greed and fear and envy and selfishness? I pray that God will liberate us from the god of money who tells us that we never have enough. As we prepare for another time of

² William R. Phillippe, *A Stewardship Scrapbook*. © 1999 Geneva Press.

financial stewardship, I encourage us all to dream about how we can best use the many resources God has given us in God's service in the church.

I also pray that God might deliver us from the god of violence. This past week, our hearts broke once again, as we learned of the shooting in Las Vegas. We don't yet know why this man decided to shoot innocent people who were simply enjoying a concert. We may never know. Now nearly sixty families are in mourning, mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, children and friends. I don't know what the answer is, but it sure feels like guns have become something of an idol in this country. Hunting is one thing, but too many of our sisters and brothers are dying, even right down the street in Wilmington. I fail to see how guns make us safer, especially semi-automatic weapons in the hands of civilians. In what ways have guns become an idol?

Yet this brings me back to the beginning of this first commandment. Before God asks anything of us, God is already at work in the world, creating a new future for a people who are enslaved. Freedom is given first, before any law. I want to believe that even right now, in the aftermath of the shooting in Las Vegas, right now in the aftermath of hurricanes and earthquakes, right now in the aftermath of car accidents, right now God is at work, creating a new freedom, a new opportunity for God's people, even if we cannot see it yet. That is what God has done in the past. Surely God is at work again right now.

Thomas Hawkins, who is co-pastor of the church in Hartford, Connecticut where I used to serve, wrote this last week that the "The best antidote to despair is to remember all the ways that history surprised those who thought the future would simply be an inevitable extension of the present amid which they were already living. While hope is about the future, the grounds for this hope lie in our memory of the past. This is why the biblical tradition returns again and again to the surprising acts of God in history. Who would think a small band of slaves could escape from Pharaoh or survive a trek across the desert to find a new home flowing with milk and honey? Who would think a defeated nation in exile from its homeland could ever return to its own land? Who would think that someone executed for treason by the most powerful empire in the world could rise from the dead and proclaim the triumph of life over death?"³ Who would think? God is already at work, even before anything is asked of us.

So, Hawkins says, week by week, I will continue to hope against hope that worship matters because it offers a vision of an alternative future that is filled with hopeful possibilities that are grounded in the historical memory of what has happened to God's people and God's world in the past. I will continue to hope

³ Thomas Hawkins, Hoping Against Hope, Thoughts from the Pastor, October 6, 2017 Email from First Presbyterian Church, Hartford, CT.

against hope that the food we collect week-by-week for the hungry, the items we gather for children in need, ... or the hospitality we extend to strangers matter because it is often what happens away from the bright lights of the stage and seemingly in the dark that really matters in the lives of needy individuals and for the long arc of the acts of God in human history. I will keep on calling those in Congress and lifting my voice in protest, working to educate and to change minds or hearts. Most of all, I will continue to value participation in the worshipping community of [this] Church, which seeks to mirror in its own life the justice, peacemaking, and inclusivity of God's vision for a broken world made whole.

“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.”

Let us pray: Gracious God, help us to live by your grace, and to sense anew all the ways that you are at work in the background, in ways we cannot even comprehend, creating a whole new world for your precious people. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.