When we were leaving on our trip to New York and Washington, D.C., a week ago, we saw college students leaving for spring break. It was a time of freedom. I wondered what they’d be doing; I also wondered what it was like for these young people when they left home after high school. Leaving home is scary, but liberating, not just for children but for parents as well. For many young people this is the chance to experience freedom. For 18 years they may have heard, “As long as you’re under my roof, you’ll live under my rules.” Well, now its time for young persons to be out from under that roof and out from under those particular rules, restrictions to freedom. Instead of being told what to do, you have the freedom to do more of what you want to do. Having to eat what’s placed in front of you, you now have the freedom of eating what you want. Having to go to bed at a certain time, you now have the freedom to stay up as late as you want and sleep as late as you want. If you were required to come to church, now you have the freedom to not attend. You now have the freedom to go places, see things, experience life in a way not available to you before.

Those first weeks after having moved away from home, whether one is working or going to school, can be a sumptuous freedom feast. Some people can’t handle it, they gorge themselves on the freedom and it becomes too much. You’ve seen it happen to people and so have I. They partied excessively, didn’t show up for class or work, no discipline, and many didn’t show up for the second semester. Freedom without some sense of order exhausts a person. If there is no order, no discipline that shapes each day, you grow tired of making decisions. If there is no routine, no ritual and you have to negotiate each move each day, freedom becomes fatiguing. We can feel enslaved within our freedom. Without discipline and rules, we can become slaves to our own weaknesses, our own personality quirks. Without discipline and rules we revert to selfish habits and behaviors.

While in Washington, D.C. we had the occasion to drive by the Watergate Hotel complex. A few years ago I read transcripts of the tape recording in the Nixon White House during the early days of the Watergate scandal in 1972-1973. Because he and his staff felt they had tremendous freedom, often outside the law, Nixon became a slave to the dark side of his personality. With no one to restrict him or to say no, Nixon indulged his paranoid and vengeful nature to the point where his time and energy became increasingly consumed with the scandal. The freedom he exploited became a slavery and eventually led to his resignation. He lost the freedom to govern. Freedom can fatigue us. Freedom can corrupt us. Freedom can enslave us.

The Hebrew people knew about being slaves. The had to work day and night to satisfy an insatiable lord. They felt the pain of body aching from too much tension too much work, and not enough play. They yearned for the chance to start a new life, to be free from the Pharaoh’s iron hand. With the help of Moses, the Hebrews secured their freedom and they found themselves in the wilderness of freedom. You see, when you work for Pharaoh, you know where your next day’s meal is coming from. But in the wilderness, there’s no Pharaoh cupboard — daily bread is all you have. After all, the road is long and you have to travel light, otherwise you’ll be bogged down. The Hebrews knew they had manna and quail today, but what about tomorrow? The Hebrews loved being free, but they longed for security and stability. And they were forever fussing about the situation to Moses. They finally wandered long enough that they knew their freedom depended on establishing some order. Pharaoh is one thing. Absolute freedom is another. But both of them are hard task masters.

God saw their wandering in freedom and heard the fear in their heart and spoke to Moses. “Here are ten guidelines by which life can be ordered and structured so that you will not only be secure in community, you will be free in faith.”

Can you name the ten? Only a small percentage of Americans can name up to four. Moses did not, as one young boy claimed, go up to Mt. Cyanide to get the Ten Amendments. I remind you that the first Commandment was not, as one child suggested, when Eve told Adam to eat the apple. The fifth Commandment was not, as another child believed, “To humor thy father and mother,” nor was the seventh, “Thou shall not admit adultery.” The third grade religion class teacher, reviewing the Ten Commandments, asked Johnny if his mother told him not to tease the dog and pull his tail and he did anyway, what commandment would he be breaking. I don’t know the number of the commandment but it says, “What God has joined together let no man pull apart.” Do you recall my sermon of a few years ago, “Snickers Bar,” as a way of remembering the Ten Commandments?
So what does God say to us in those Ten Commandments?

God says, “This is my word to you. You shall have only me as God. Don’t make images, because they might become substitutes for me. You shall remember me one day a week, remember your holy origin and your holy sustenance. You shall not show disrespect for me by wrongfully using my name, by taking my name and using it for yourself. You shall show respect for others in your community. I am God and you are brothers and sisters. Therefore, honor those who give you life, don’t kill each other, don’t violate the rights of others relationship and property. Don’t look with envy and covet what belongs to your neighbor and develop trustworthy relationships by not lying to each other.” Now I’d say that’s a pretty good set of rules, but the Hebrew people soon found out that those ten didn’t cover all the “what ifs” – so they developed hundreds and hundreds of subrules – or bylaws to help them live in the community of God.

And the church in its own way has done the same thing. In an attempt to help interpret the Ten Commandments, other rules have developed. Many of us were raised in these rules, most of which are prohibitions, written or unwritten. You shall not dance. You shall not play cards. You shall not drink alcohol. You shall not smoke. You shall not be an elder if you are a female. You shall not be a pastor if you are a female. You shall not discuss sexuality in the church. You shall not laugh in church. You shall not get emotional in regard to your faith. You shall not question church authority or have doubts.

Rules to interpret rules, rules intended to bring freedom to living but which end up bringing slavery or restrictions. And for some people, those rules become so heavy and oppressive that they either seek out another church and belief system, or they rebel and try to get as far away as possible. They turn their back on all these rules and adopt an attitude of self proclaimed freedom. “I’m free to do anything I want.” But when we take that approach, where are we? We’re right back in the wilderness with nothing secure and nothing on which to count. We’re back where we started from, slaves to our isolation, slaves to our fear that we will be alone and no one will love us or care for us.

But slavery of law and slavery of freedom is precisely what is avoided in the Ten Commandments. Notice how these Commandments function, there are two sets, two tablets. The first set, the first four commandments, are sometimes called church positive Commandments. They basically assert that God is God. God is God and there is no other God who is worthy of our honor and our worship – there are other gods but none are worthy of honor and worship: not the god of money, not the god of fame, not the god of sports, not the god of leisure, not the god of pleasure, not the god of consumerism. There is no other one worthy of honor but God.

If there is no other genuine God, then that means I am not God, and it means you are not God. It’s not up to us to decide each other’s fate, or make judgments about each other’s worth or value. We don’t have to worry that everything is on our shoulders, we can allow God to move and act and create and inspire and inform and transform and surprise and amaze us.

That’s exactly what God did for the Hebrew people. God delivered them from bondage and from the wilderness experience. That act of deliverance immediately called forth an ethical response from God’s people. Worship and behavior were never separated. The negative tone of the other six Commandments set the outer limits of the Covenant. To violate these boundaries was not a misdemeanor. It was breaking the very fiber of which the divine human relationship consisted.
The first four Commandments – the positive Commandments, which have to do with the being of God, the day of God, and the name of God, set the positive inner content for life in the Covenant. The God of the Covenant laid claim upon His people pointing them to a new life and a new destiny. The crossing of the Red Sea was an act of grace. They, through no fault of their own, through no merit of their own, were chosen. They, who were no people, even slave people, the dregs of society, were elected and given value by God. That is the Red Sea experience, that is grace, Sinai was the act of response. Those who are loved, those who are chosen and given a sense of their dignity and worth, decide now that they will live this choice out of obedience. Obedience to the Commandments was an appropriate response to God's grace. Today, in a time when we fear that all moral requirements of faith have been swept away in a tide of doubt about absolutes, we can proclaim that there are indeed things that are non-negotiable, that are still true, still right, still applicable, still liveable ways of living and relating which are more liberating than enslaving. Commandments which I believe God would prefer we practice in our lives rather than post in some school or courthouse. Today, as then, the elect people stand before Sinai to hear what election demands of them. Amen.

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