

About ten years ago now, the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, Roy Moore, waged a long drawn out fight to keep a monument of the Ten Commandments in his courthouse. That battle is part of the long line of incidents in the United States concerning the involvement of religion in the political life of the nation, something which we in Canada have long moved past. Despite our ambivalence to the division of church and state in Canada, I remember this story finding its way onto to Canadian News broadcasts and onto to late night comedy shows, no one could resist poking fun at the judge waging the ‘crusade’ to keep the commandments in the courthouse. Whether you agree with him or not, the whole affair was quite humourous, and the tenacity with which Justice Moore fought was a little over the top. Lost in reporting on the story however was the fact that the monument he wanted to keep in his courthouse weighed 5,280 pounds, or almost 530lbs per commandment! A story in the *Atlantic Monthly* recounted that Judge Moore had lugged his gargantuan monument to and from each appearance at his courthouse, using a flatbed truck and that it needed a 57-foot crane to haul it off the truck, with the crane noticeably buckling under the weight.¹

While we might rightly laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of the story, I think that it serves as a perfect illustration of how many people have come to see the 10 commandments. To many, and perhaps many of you here, the Ten Commandments are burdensome, they seem to be heavy and restrictive. They can seem to be rules that God has put in place to limit us; they can just seem too hard to live up to. Many people in our culture would have a hard time naming all ten, but even then I imagine most people would be convinced that at the centre of them is a self-righteous “thou shalt not” statement. I imagine most people think they are either antiquated, too morally restrictive or perhaps some people think they are just common sense, and need not be written down in a set of rules. Even if we have a relatively positive impression of the Ten Commandments, I doubt many of us would jump up to say that they are Good News for us. I think one of the major reasons the Ten Commandments can seem burdensome for us, is that we feel they restrict our freedom, they seem to be a way God is limiting our ability to choose, even if we agree with them in principal. It is one thing to know that it’s wrong to murder or steal and quite another thing when someone tells you not to do it!

I’m sure we have all experienced this one way or another, either when we were children or with your own children: the minute you are told not to do something, the temptation to do it becomes greater, even if it was something that you didn’t want to do before! The familiar adage is rules are meant to be broken, and I think this is largely because when we hear a rule, when we have something imposed on us, we feel our freedom is being challenged, that our free will is being curbed. Rules often appear burdensome, they seem to be imposed merely to weigh us down, to keep us in our place. If this is how we have come to view the Ten Commandments, than a 5000lb monument sitting on a truck and buckling a crane is the perfect image, but it was never the image God intended for us or for the Israelites before us.

When we see the Ten Commandments as a set of heavy burdens that make our life more difficult, or as obstacles to avoid, or as irrelevant to our daily life, we neglect the fact that God does not begin the commandments with an order – he does not say “Here are 10 rules, Obey them or else!” – but rather the Ten Commandments begin with a glorious announcement of freedom “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” It is this declaration that should frame how we read the following “ten commands”. It’s interesting to note that nowhere in the text are they identified as commandments, our passage opens with by saying that “God spoke all these words”. It is important to remember that God creates through speaking, that the words of God or perhaps the Word of God is God’s creative force in the universe. So if these are not just commands, not just rules to obey, then we can ask ourselves, what are they? What exactly is God creating here with these “Ten Words.”

I think that first and foremost God is creating a zone of liberation, he is declaring that his Kingdom, will be marked as a Kingdom of liberation, as a kingdom where freedom from the powers that enslave all of creation will be an identifying characteristic. This is why our passage begins with God reminding the Israelites what he has done for them, reminding them of his saving work when he brought them out of Egypt. Seen in this way the Ten Commandments are not rules delivered by an authoritarian deity, hell bent on our obedience

¹ Tom G. Long, "Dancing the Decalogue (Ex. 20:1-17)," *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2006

but rather as God's loving words to his people, as God's steadfast promises to the people of Israel. If we let the first two verses of the passage guide how we read the following verses then instead of rules to obey, we hear God promising what life will be like in his kingdom. In these "Ten Words" God is creating a kingdom of freedom and peace.

In God's kingdom we will have no need for any other God but him, he will be enough for us. Those things which push us to worship other Gods will be gone, all there will be is the liberating love of God. In God's kingdom the idols which enslave us: money, power, fame, will hold no power, and we'll have no need of them, the only object of our worship will be the one true God. In God's kingdom you will be free to rest on the seventh day, there will be no need to work because God will provide for you. In God's kingdom there will be no need to murder, steal, lie or covet, because we will all have life and have it abundantly, with no need to gain an advantage over one another. As we experience God's liberation, as we are invited to live into God's kingdom of freedom, the "Ten Commandments" should no longer appear as burdens or weights that hold us down, but rather they should lift us up like wings into the wind of God, into the activity of the Holy Spirit and let us experience life abundantly.

While the Ten Commandments or Ten Words gave the Israelites a glimpse into what life in God's Kingdom would look like: in Jesus Christ – the definitive Word of God – those promises have been fulfilled. In Jesus Christ – in his Cross and in his Resurrection – we have experienced true freedom, we have been freed from the power of sin and death. In Jesus Christ the promises of the Ten Commandments, the promises of abundant life that God made to Israel and to us are fulfilled. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus tells us this very thing, he says "that I did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill it". In Jesus the God's promise of abundant and everlasting life are fulfilled, the reign of liberation that God promised to the Israelites in the Ten Commandments is inaugurated in Jesus' crucifixion and explodes into the world at his Resurrection.

If we see the Ten Commandments as God's promises, if we see them framed by God's great saving acts, then for those who believe, Jesus Christ is the only logical end. In opening up for us the way of eternal and abundant life, Jesus has made the promises of the Ten Commandments a reality. He has shown us that we never again have to see them as burdens that way us down, but rather as God's gift of life in his kingdom to us.

The Ten Commandments are not conditional statements that offer us a reward if we are able to complete them (that is burdensome). They are not orders meant to keep us in line, or ensure that we don't falter. We have already received the reward, we have already experienced God's definitive act of salvation in Jesus Christ. God welcomes us into his kingdom unconditionally, with open arms and boundless love and mercy. As we are invited to share in God's kingdom we hear the promises of God echoed in our ears: there is no murder here, there is no pain, no deceit, no sorrow, no disrespect, no other Gods but the creator and sustainer of the universe.

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Let these words shape how we read the Ten Commandments, let us remember the freedom God has promised us in Jesus Christ, because if you do then we are prompted to live a life that is shaped by the freedom created by that God. To see the Ten Commandments as declarations of freedom, to see them as God's promises of what life is like in his kingdom, is far more life giving than carrying around the 5000lbs of obligations and worrying about whether the crane that carries them will buckle under their weight. Remember that you are free in Christ; **you are free**. May you always live lives shaped by that freedom!

Amen