



# The New England Church Pulpit

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Dancing The Decalogue

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*Then God spoke all these words:*

*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the house of slavery in the land of Egypt; you shall have no other gods before me.*

*You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. For I am the Lord your God, who shows steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses my name.*

*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God, in which you shall not do any work.*

*For in six days God made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

*Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be joyous in the life that God gives you.*

*You shall not murder.*

*You shall not commit adultery.*

*You shall not steal.*

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

*You shall not covet your neighbor's house or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

*Moses said to the people: "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to help keep you from sinning and from doing things that undermine an abundant life."*

Harken back, if you will, 12 or 13 years to the days of Judge Roy Moore, the now-removed chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, who waged war on the culture by his stubborn fight to keep a monument of the Ten Commandments on the lawn of his courthouse. He took his show on the road, as it were, and began lugging around this enormous piece of stone across the country on the back of a flatbed truck. What you may not remember is that the thing weighed over 5,200 pounds—over 2 ½ tons—which factors out to over 500 pounds per commandment. Whenever the truck returned to Alabama, it took a 57-foot, five-ton I-beam crane to lift this rock from its chariot, and even then the crane buckled under the weight of the monument.

It is a paradigm for this often misunderstood passage of scripture, namely that these supposed commandments are a burden of immense proportion, foisted on us by literalists who hope to encumber others as they are encumbered. Most people cannot name all ten, and most people would say that they all start with a “thou shalt not.” Moore’s rock is a fitting symbol for the way these words have become a modern version of the Pharisees when Jesus accused them of neglecting the weightier matters of the law by making mountains out of molehills. You get Jesus’s humor here when you think about this dinosaur on the 18-wheeler hauled around by a deposed judge who wanted them in the courtroom but who himself violated many of these commandments he wanted to foist on others.

Theologian Thomas Long reminds us that understanding the Decalogue as a set of burdens overlooks something essential, namely that they are prefaced not by an order—“Here are ten rules. Obey them”—but instead by a breathtaking announcement of freedom: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery in the land of Egypt.” The phrase “ten commandments” is common shorthand for this passage, but they are not commandments. They are more accurately translated “ten words,” for they describe life that prevails in the zone of God’s liberation. “Because the Lord is your God,” the Decalogue affirms, “you are free not to need any other gods. You are free to rest on the seventh day; free from the tyranny of lifeless idols; free from murder, stealing and covetousness as ways to establish yourself in life.

The Decalogue begins with the good news of what God has done for our liberation and then describes the shape of the freedom that results. Long suggests that if we want to symbolize the presence of these words among us, rather than build obscenely ostentatious monuments, we would do well to hold a dance. The good news of the God who set people free is the music; the ten words are the dance steps of those who hear it playing. They are more wings to help us soar on the wind of God than weights to tie us down to the “oughts and shoulds”

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow talks about how we transmit our ethical ideals to future generations more by telling stories than by rules and regulations. “Stories,” he says, “do more than keep memories alive. Sometimes these stories become so implanted in our minds that they act back upon us, directly and powerfully.” We remember stories in ways that impact more profoundly than the weight of commandments, much as Dr. Seuss will be remembered long after we’ve forgotten how to name the ten commandments.

Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a volunteer fireman and ambulance attendant who, as a child, had to have some of his teeth extracted under general anesthesia. He was terrified as most kids would be, but a nurse standing nearby said to him, “Don’t worry, I’ll be here right beside you no matter what happens.” When he woke up from surgery, there she was, still standing beside him.

Fast forward 20 years later when, as part of the ambulance crew that was called to the scene of an accident where the driver was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, Jack crawled inside to try to get him out of the wreckage. With gasoline dripping there was a serious danger of fire and explosion, and the whole time the driver was crying out about how scared of dying he was. Jack kept saying to him, recalling what the nurse had said so many years before, “Look, don’t worry, I’m right here with you. I’m not going anywhere.”

That’s the way the Decalogue as story works. First comes the experience of being cared for, the experience of being free, the experience of being loved as you are, preserved in the form of a narrative. Then there follows the life shaped ethically around that profound story. A nurse saying “I’ll be right here beside you” becomes the action of a man risking his life for a stranger because he knows in his bones that he just can’t leave him. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the

house of slavery” prompts us to live lives shaped by the freedom created by that God.

These words are about life, about the enjoyment of life that comes from being free of the things that wreck relationships, that cut you off from joy, that inhibit you from investing in the great adventure of living. God does not need to be appeased by our following rules; God is besotted with us already, and loves us unconditionally. The Decalogue is not a formula of commandments for making God happy, but a roadmap for freedom. Moses said to the people upon showing them the words: Do not be afraid; for God has come to help keep you from going in the wrong direction, from doing things that kill a joyous life.

Today we gather around a table that celebrates the good news of freedom, sharing together in the unconditional love of a God who says to each of us “Do not be afraid: I’m here beside you.” Communion, like the Decalogue, is a way to practice receiving a holy grace. There’s nothing we have to do to earn it, nothing we have to do to keep it, except to accept it, enjoy it, and live within the freedom of a God who loves.

Long comments: To see the Decalogue as declarations of freedom is far more satisfying than hauling around tons of dreary obligations and worrying about whether the springs and shocks are going to hold up on the flatbed truck. And so we gather around this table so we can go out into the week, dancing to the music of these ten words and the freedom they announce. Amen.

--Rev. Gary L. McCann

(This sermon and its title was taken from an article by Thomas Long in The Christian Century, Mar 07, 2006.)

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, center of time yet beyond all time, we gather to wait on your presence today. We are creatures of time who are bound by linear, temporal hours even as we long to live in eternal, boundless time. We come apart from our rapid-paced schedules where time gets away from us, where time becomes a boundary in which we must get things done every 24 hours, and where we find ourselves impatient with the demands of a culture of instant everything. We push the elevator button several times in our frustration of a delayed door closing. We honk the horn vigorously when the car in front of us doesn't move as soon as the light changes. We raise our voice and say things that hurt others' feelings because we are always running late. We worship time like the Israelites worshiped the Golden Calf they created out of their impatience with Moses for lingering too long on the mountain with God.

So we come here to wait; to breathe; to hear the still, small voice of God; to immerse ourselves in the beauty of the day, to be invigorated by the warm handshakes and hugs of friends who gather here. We come here to practice waiting in the light of colored glass so as to hone our craft for waiting creatively at traffic lights, or the doctor's office, in line at the store, or until some unknown thing becomes clear to us.

Today we hear the words of scripture that are so often misinterpreted for the purpose of condemning or shackling us to some preconceived notion of what we must do to please you. Help us to reframe these words as pictures of freedom, as works of art that can hang on the walls of our hearts to remind us that we can do nothing to please you other than being completely who we are. And so we come here to experience what the Psalmist tells us: they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

O God, our hearts are still breaking from the tragedy in Florida. And all we seem able to do is wring our hands and argue about the cause in order to defend our position. Help us to move on past this petty bickering and do something constructive to protect our students, our youth, and our communities. We are grateful for the young people who have taken up the cause and are demanding that something be done in this regard. Give us courage to act for the well-being of everyone in our society: to provide services for the mentally ill; to free ourselves from prejudice and racism; to move beyond selfish motives for a larger cause.

Be today with those who grieve; those who are ill; those awaiting the results of tests; those who feel oppressed and sidelined by society; those who are struggling with their gender identity; those who are lonely and depressed. May our prayers have feet and hands and loving hearts to reach out to those in need so that we might be your body embracing them in love. Amen.