

There are several things that make today special. It's a day when we get to gather together for worship in this lovely outdoor space, and that's always special, isn't it? Moreover, it's Father's Day, and we've already prayed a blessing on fathers and will send off the men this morning with a treat as a gesture of gratitude. But it's also Juneteenth, that is June 19<sup>th</sup>. Juneteenth is our newest federally declared holiday. It honors the day when enslaved Americans learned of their freedom, which resulted from the passing of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment that abolished slavery. Slavery was officially legal for 246 years in our nation, which means that African Americans were in slavery for approximately 12 generations worth. Think about that.....12 generations worth of ingrained generational suffering and trauma. We this morning can little imagine either the misery of slavery or the magnitude of its abolition. Although obviously it's been a rough road since that time, in which discrimination, prejudice, racism and hostility have continued to pose huge obstacles for our fellow citizens who descended from those slaves. I'm so grateful that our nation has recognized Juneteenth as a holiday because it serves to educate and remind all of us about this dark and grim aspect of our history. Both those who were enslaved and those who benefitted from the enslaving of others have been deeply impacted by this history, an impact that obviously continues to this day. At least we all now have a designated day to celebrate slavery's end. What a transition it must be to move from slavery into freedom!

This timing of Sunday falling on Juneteenth could not be more providential for my sermonic purposes this morning. We are continuing to reflect upon the 10 Commandments. Commandments from God to provide life-giving rules and boundaries to ensure that an enslaved people, newly freed, had a way to move forward. Sound at all familiar? Like the African Americans in our nation, the Hebrew

people were also enslaved for centuries, for at least 12 generations, most likely. In the event of the Exodus, God liberated the people from slavery and they entered the desert of Sinai as freed people. The Exodus was the Hebrew's Juneteenth! They then faced huge obstacles in being free, namely how to now govern themselves as opposed to following harsh laws laid upon them by others. What a transition it must be to move from slavery into freedom!

African Americans struggled to move forward as free people in our nation, largely because of the still very present racism and discrimination they faced. The ancient Hebrews, about 3000 years earlier, also struggled to move forward as free people, not because the Egyptians who enslaved them were still oppressing them, but simply because they had spent at least 12 generations not knowing what freedom meant or involved. Maybe we, who have likely never been enslaved nor had an ancestor who was, should also give this some thought. What *does* it mean to be free? Does it mean having a representative government in which one has a vote? Does it mean Fourth of July and fireworks and hotdogs? Does it mean taking on responsibility for one's code of conduct? Or does it mean the license to do whatever I please, because it's a free country and you can't stop me? That latter understanding of freedom is, to my mind, disturbingly prevalent in our nation, and it is a far cry from how God perceives freedom in our lesson today and throughout Scripture. Freedom, within the world of faith and Scripture, is *never* about getting to be as irresponsible and self-indulgent as you like, standing on your rights to do whatever you please. Freedom, within the world of faith and Scripture, is *always* about being freed to live responsibly and ethically and well. It's about being free to love God and love your neighbor. Last Sunday we looked at the first set of commandments, which centered on the vertical dimension of relationality between ourselves and God. We were to worship only God, to set up no idols other than God, to not take God's name in vain, and to observe a Sabbath, both for ourselves and everyone. All these

commands are designed to foster a sacred space in our lives with God in the center. The first tablet or table of the commandments are focused on how we may love God.

Today we are looking at all but the last of the remaining commandments, which form the Second Tablet or Table, and these deal with the horizontal dimension of how we are to love our neighbor. To summarize *these* commandments: we are to honor our parents, and we are not to murder, commit adultery, steal, or bear false witness. In many ways these seem so self-evident as for their codification to be unnecessary, so obvious as to be universally acknowledged and obeyed. Yet it doesn't really work out that way, does it? Given that this is Juneteenth, let's consider these commandments in light of 12 generations of enslavement of fellow humans in our nation. How did our actions, as a nation, line up with these commandments? Two of the commandments involve the proper boundaries within familial relationships: honoring parents and honoring marriage. The institution of slavery repeatedly broke apart husbands and wives, parents and children. Male slave owners felt entitled to abuse the enslaved women within their power should they wish to do so. It's tragically certain to say that familial bonds were in no way honored or respected and those two commandments very much disregarded and disobeyed. I don't believe we will score any better on the others. You shall not murder? Slaves were commonly killed at their master's direct behest or indirectly because of the conditions in which they were forced to live. You shall not steal? Slaves owned nothing. Not only were possessions stolen from them, their freedom, their family members were stolen. You shall not bear false witness? The entire institution of slavery was built around lies and false witness that claimed innate white superiority and innate black inferiority. Worse yet, this lie was often made in God's name, which breaks yet another commandment from last week---to not take the Lord's name in vain. It's safe to say that all of these commandments were broken in the enslaving of another race of people by another; and both those descended from the enslaved and

from the enslavers have continued to pay a terrible price of injustice, distorted privilege, and ongoing misery. These commandments are intended to safeguard the vulnerable, to provide life-giving boundaries that make healthy community possible. None of them were obeyed in regard to slavery, and so none of the benefits and blessings they would have provided occurred. Sorry, this isn't a feel-good sermon, is it? But the commandments aren't feel-good commandments either. The commandments aren't intended to bolster our self-esteem or justify our agendas. In fact, they really aren't aimed at us so much *individually* at all, not even for us to attempt to perfect our souls for some heavenly gradebook in the by-and-by. The commandments are aimed more so at us *collectively*. God's interest is in providing us guidelines that free us to love God and to love our neighbor. The racism that engendered slavery provides damning evidence of the cost that is paid when we ignore these Commandments, when we instead turn God-given freedom into privilege to *use* others rather than responsibility *towards* others. And I hope we can further recognize that it's not so much that God is looking to punish us for breaking these commandments; but rather that when we break them, *we bring* destruction and misery upon ourselves and upon our neighbors. It's on us! The Commandments are not about an angry God waiting to punish us if and when we fail to obey; the whole point is that we, as free people, are to internalize these life-giving rules in order to safeguard community and live well as individuals and a society.

Looking at these commandments specifically, we'd have to admit that they are broad, no doubt about that. There are layers and layers of nuance to any one of them, and there's no way we can delve into all of that at present. But if we take them at their most *plain* meaning, I think we get the gist. They can be summarized by the commandment Jesus gives us to love one another. They can also be summarized by the Golden Rule, also given to us by Jesus: Treat others as you would like others to treat you. Seminary professor Rolf Jacobson said that the good and great news of these commandments is

this: “God loves your neighbor so much that God gives you the law. And God loves you so much, that God gives your neighbor the exact same law.” Well, that is good and great news, isn’t it? God is impartial. In fact, the commandments are amazingly egalitarian throughout. Remember how the Sabbath is to be observed not just for the gently born, but for male and female servants, for immigrants, even for animals? And here we see that even within a powerfully patriarchal society, both fathers *and mothers* are to be honored. Ancient though they are, these commandments do not support racism, sexism, classism, or you name it. We are all to be seeking the welfare of the other, regardless. To the extent we do that, we obey this series of Commandments and we are blessed.

So I said this wasn’t a feel-good sermon, but I’m going to name a few things we can feel good about today anyway. We can feel good about Father’s Day. God is a loving Father to us, and any of us who have been blest through the love of God and/or the love of a father, grandfather, uncle, teacher, neighbor or scout master celebrate that love. It makes all the difference. We can feel good about Juneteenth. Not because it recognizes a happy part of our history, but because we are facing the truth about a terrible part of our history of slavery, we are celebrating the abolishment of slavery, and we are seeking to live in more just ways. That makes all the difference. And we can feel good about the 10 Commandments. Because God loves us so much that God cares about how we love God and how we love each other. God will stop at nothing to promote loving and just relationships and community for our sake, and for the sake of the world that God so loves, no exceptions. That also makes all the difference. Amen.

