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Exodus 20:1-17

John 2:13-22

## CHALLENGE TO THE WAYS OF THE WORLD

There once was an insecure teacher who seemed to like rules and being in charge more than she liked her students. She set up a series of harsh rules that met her needs instead of the needs of the students. Functioning like a taskmaster, the primary goal she had was to make her look good instead of creating a good learning environment for the students. She tried to whip her students into shape responding to any rules infraction with the most severe discipline. The classroom was a place of intimidation from day one. The homework given was overwhelming as she tried to get her class to work in slavish ways, again so she would look good. Behind her back, the students called her 'Pharaoh.' As a result of the teacher's approach, the class of students all began to hate school. The main things they learned was that their well-being didn't matter and that their teacher didn't care about them.

The next year, that class got moved to a teacher who loved and cared about her students, but this teacher didn't like to have a lot of rules, or frankly any rules. She wanted absolute unstructured freedom in her class and let the students know that. She felt the students could make choices that would serve them well and hoped that those who made poor choices would learn from their mistakes. But as a result, with no guardrails to keep them in line, bullies began to pick upon others. Without oversight, those who decided to ignore their schoolwork began to cheat on tests. The classroom soon devolved into what was akin to a war zone instead of someplace conducive to learning.

What is the role of rules for a group of people and what kind of leadership best serves the needs of the whole group? The Hebrew people had been in a situation in Egypt somewhat akin to the first classroom I told you about, where they were oppressed by someone who really was named Pharaoh. Everything was supposed to be done in order to make him look good. The needs of the people were unimportant. They were treated as slaves, dominated by cruel rules enforced by cruel taskmasters who seemed to relish the harsh treatment they carried out.

So when, by God's grace, the Hebrew people were released from their captivity in Egypt, they relished their newfound freedom. In a short period of time, they moved to something like the second classroom I mentioned earlier, one without any structure for their life together. Problems quickly arose. Those who had been treated harshly when they were enslaved were quite likely to treat others harshly. What would be the norms for acceptable behavior that would open the way for the needs of all the people to be met? What commandments or rules along with the best application of them would lead to the best outcome for all?

There ended up being a lot of commandments in the Torah, the Hebrew bible – 613 of them in fact. When Jesus was asked what he understood to be the greatest commandment of them all, he listed two of them. The first was that we are to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But he said it had to be paired with a second commandment that guided us to love our neighbor in a similar way that we love ourselves. The ten commandments had been set up with those same two emphases, focused first on the relationship with God and then upon the relationship with neighbors. A lot of societal rules are set up to serve the needs of those in charge. But the ten commandments were given as a gift from God through Moses for the benefit of all of the people, not in the least as rules to be followed just because they were the rules.

In fact, we get a clear message of the purpose of the ten commandments from the expression that precedes them, where God says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." These commandments came from the One who had liberated them. These commandments actually had the capacity to liberate them further from oppressive kinds of behavior that would undermine the positive well-being of all. A peaceful order and further liberation were the goal, but as various commandments ended up getting applied for different purposes, there was a different outcome.

The Gospel of John tells us that when people were coming to the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate the greatest of the annual festivals, the Passover, which was a celebration of the Hebrews' liberation from slavery in Egypt, that Jesus saw impediments to expressions of gratitude unto God that were being put in the people's way. Those who made a pilgrimage to the temple were instructed to bring a sacrificial offering unto God. Those who came from a distance could purchase an

animal at the temple so they could make their sacrifice. But this was a situation that led to abuse, where high prices and fees for what was needed for the temple visit were piled on in a way that particularly impacted those who were poor.

We see in the account an expression of Jesus' passion, even anger toward those who were benefiting from setting up such impediments to the people's expressions of love and gratitude unto God. This helps us to see that anger is not necessarily sinful. In fact, indifference to this kind of taking advantage of the poor is what would have been sinful in this situation. Jesus overturned the tables of merchants and moneychangers who were gouging those who came to make their worshipful expressions. Zeal for the peoples' relationship with God and with one another required strong action. What Jesus did was disruptive enough that temple officials and merchants and worshipers all had to reconsider the common practices that had developed that undercut a celebration of God's great liberating work.

In the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ, he helped students of the faith to understand the liberating purposes of the commandments when they were applied as God intended. He would overturn not just the tables of the merchants. He overturned all kinds of practices that led the people away from the love of God and neighbor. And rather than the temple being the ultimate place where people would go for an encounter with God, we as Christians affirm that Jesus is the primary One through whom we can encounter a God who still wants to liberate us from that which oppresses us and from the ways in which we oppress others. The structure of God's instruction that comes in word and in person opens the way for us to grow in the love of God and neighbor so the needs of all can be met and an experience of community can enrich us all. God's deep care for each and every one of us invites us into a life-long classroom, where we are blessed to have the greatest teacher of all who overcomes the impediments to our learning and helps us grow into all we have the capacity to become. Thanks be to God.