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Lent 3
Christ Church Gardiner

From our earliest days, we have been given rules and told to follow them. Rules for living together in our homes. Rules for how we treat our friends. Rules for how we act in school. Rules for driving. Rules for the workplace. Even rules for church, right?

Rules are important, and they do help us to live better together. That's why so much of kindergarten is just learning the rules of how to play well with your friends. And rules usually need consequences to make them effective. In kindergarten, if you remember, that consequence was often having your name written on the board, or for my kids, it was having your clip moved—a truly devastating punishment to a five year old.

We have a great family story about my little sister, kindergarten, and consequences. She was the baby of our family by ten years, which is probably the reason why from a very young age, she had a fair amount of sass—what you New Englanders might call cheekiness. Just a few weeks into her kindergarten career, she came home to report that her name had been written on the board for talking out of turn. My stepmother hoping to instill a little remorse in her responded, “Well Emily, aren't you embarrassed that your friends saw your name written on the board?” To which my sister replied, “No...they can't read yet.”

That was not a consequence that brought Emily much shame or remorse, and I am pretty sure, knowing my sister, that it wasn't the last time her name was written on the board for talking.

Rules and consequences are a part of life and this past year has brought many more rules to our lives. Wear a mask. Stay at least six feet apart. Don't spend time indoors with people outside your bubble. Wash your hands for at least 30 seconds. And while rules can feel constraining, we know that good ones can save lives. Those are the rules that ask us to be responsible to our neighbors and to understand the connections between our behaviors and what happens to the community.

Today we heard from Exodus, the most famous set of rules in our Judeo-Christian tradition. These words from God, what we call the ten commandments are often touted as the guide to living a moral life. But we miss their full meaning if we don't understand that they are more than rules. They are evidence of the transformative and revolutionary relationship between God and Israel that is spoken into being with these words. A relationship of covenant and promise.

In these commandments, God is teaching Israel how to live into the relationship that began when God first called Abraham and Sarah to be a blessing, to go forth and multiply a people that would be God's very own. Because of that relationship, God freed the Israelites from the Pharaoh. So the commandments begin with a declaration of freedom. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

But it is not enough *to have been* freed. The work of freedom is an ongoing struggle. God knows that the Israelites fight for liberation did not cease when they

crossed the Red Sea and the Pharaoh's chariots were washed away. Liberation from "Pharaoh" will be a constant struggle.

Have you ever wondered why Pharaoh isn't named in the Bible? We're never told which particular pharaoh of Egypt, finally allowed the people of Israel to leave. Pharaoh isn't named because the liberation of Israel is not about a particular man oppressing them...but about oppression itself. Pharaohs, or instruments of oppression, will continue to show up in their lives.

These commandments handed down through Moses are God's guide for how to stay liberated from those oppressions. God begins, in the first three commandments, by talking about the human-God relationship and why that matters. Liberation will be elusive as long as we are putting other gods before the God. And liberation is impossible as long as we make idols and worship them. These other gods and idols might be money, power, youth and beauty, nationalism, white supremacy, and anything else that we humans find ourselves giving allegiance to. They have the power to enslave us. True liberation is only possible when we make our allegiance to God above all of those things.

The fourth commandment, when God asks us to keep the sabbath day holy, is a reminder that there is a rhythm of work and rest and worship in creation and that the rest and worship are as important as the work. Otherwise, we are enslaved to the work. It becomes just another oppression.

The rest of the commandments are about our relationships with one another. We can't worship God and be in a liberating relationship with God if we live in a way that oppresses our neighbors. And so we are instructed to honor and care for those who came before us. To value life. To value fidelity. To value honesty. To live a life of contentment that doesn't covet what others have.

In these commandments, God is giving Israel a new vision of what their lives can be like if love of God and love of neighbor are their guiding principles. At Mount Sinai, it is Moses that leads them toward this vision, to the promised land.

Many years later, Jesus will be telling this same story. He will warn his followers about the dangers of being enslaved to money, power, race, class, and even the Law. Jesus will command his followers to be faithful to God and neighbor, just as the Israelites heard at Mt. Sinai. He will offer his followers a new vision, and he will call that new vision the kingdom of God.

During the season of Lent, there's a tradition of giving things up. There's nothing wrong with giving up sweets or alcohol or chips or anything else, but we should also be thinking about the idols we need to give up. Lent can be a time of prayerfully thinking about those things that have power over us. Those things that we put before God and neighbor. Because the more we can give those things up and more fully live into our covenant with God, the closer we will be to the vision of Moses and Jesus, closer to the kingdom of God. Amen.