



The Rev. Anthony Estes
March 7, 2021
The Third Sunday of Lent

Hear these words of Scripture again: "I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments." Exodus 20:6 *Common English Bible*

I want to talk to you this morning about *The Green Fence*

Every now and then, I take a drive down the street of my family's first home. It was a multi-family home south of Detroit's Martin Park neighborhood. We lived in the bottom flat. It was too small for our family of six. My parents slept in the living room while me and my three sisters split the three bedrooms.

The block was small by city standards. And we knew the neighbors above us, next door to us, and directly across the street. That was it. I can't tell you today who else lived on that block.

Our mother would let us ride our bikes, an enduring joy of childhood. But she would only let us ride to the corner...

Of the green fence...

That was in the middle...

Of our small, half-sized, city block.

Then we had to turn around and peddle back.

Though other children frequently rode past the green fence, we were the children who did not. And our mother was perfectly content with that. Not because she was mean or punitive. But because she loved us. Because she was in a loving relationship with us as our mother. My parents knew something that we as children couldn't have known. That was the block had unsavory characters and empty shells that were once homes. Places where unspeakable horrors could be perpetuated upon children. In light of our context and capacity, she gave us rules to keep us safe.

The context of today's story is that God has led the sons and daughters of Jacob, Leah and Rachel out from a place of slavery to a place of freedom so that they could worship their God. They were at a place where the gods of ancient Egypt had no claim over them.

It was at Sinai, three months after the exodus, that they could experience themselves not as slaves, but as a people in relationship with the God who had covenanted with their forebears. And God wanted to be among them. To speak with them. To dwell with them. In a real way. In relationship

based on love and not transaction. This was something the gods of Egypt were incapable of doing—being in relationship with humans with no ego to placate.

The rules, the boundaries, that God established is not about God's ego. They were then and are now, an expression of God's love and generosity. The boundaries that God establishes in the Ten Commandments express God's love to children of the Covenant. The claim that God makes about God's self, that God delivered them because they were his and he was theirs, reminds us as children of the New Covenant, that the God who claims us in Christ is our God. That no other gods can claim our attention, and that the rules will not or exploit our labor or religious devotion or require of us more than what we can give to our neighbors.

The Ten Commandments are another way that God self-discloses that God *is* love.

Love tells us who we are, sometimes by telling us who we are *not*.

Often and loudly, we would we bristle at the rules and the appearance that other children were doing things that we wanted to do, like ride past the green fence. It seemed like foolishness to us. We would say to our mom and dad, but the *other* kids are doing it. And my mom would say, I don't know about the other kids or the kinds of houses they live in. Perhaps their mothers don't love them. But I love you, and this is why I don't let you do what the other kids are doing.

Because that's not who you are. You're not the unruly children. You're not the children left to their own devices. You're not the children who will embarrass *me*.

[If you want to know anything about black culture, you have to think about a black hard-working mother whose children act like they don't have any home-training.]

Working with the original language, I found my English translations being rendered not as edicts for behavior, but words about being.

You are not the ones who work 7 days a week. You are not the ones who steal or cause the death of another person. You are not the ones who bow down to gods crafted by your own hands. Because to be that person, you couldn't be your true selves, a treasured possession, a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation (cf. Exodus 19:5-6).

As children, we thought mom's rules were mean, but we complied out of fear of punishment. But as adults, we understand mom's rules to be about our safety, and might consider our obedience as a loving response and outgrowth of relationship.

For those who need to hear it, I want to encourage you to grow up a little bit. To see the law as the psalmist sees it, perfect and right and clear as to enlighten the eyes.

Lent is a season that foregrounds a spiritual practice that we should observe every day. In the presence of the God who desires to be known and who is love, we examine ourselves—not to see if we've broken any rules, because we know that we have no power within ourselves to help ourselves—Jesus perfectly observed the rules—but to see if we were our best selves. And when we see that we have not, repent and return.

There is an Italian proverb that says, "Love rules without rules." The Ten Commandments aren't so much rules as they are the words or principles that constitute the relationship between God and the

Children of Israel and by extension, those who claim the faith of Jesus. The Decalogue, another name for the Ten Commandments literally means the 10 words.

Perhaps today's words find you past the green fence. Not in the place of safety. Beyond the boundary, wandering and wondering how to get back home or even if you *can* come home. I have good news for you. God's words do not change or fail. You are God's possession. You are beloved of God. You are not the one who rebels and stays away. You are the one upon whom God lavishes mercy. You are the one that returns. You are worth the mercy because you are his. You are not too far. The house is right where you left it. Put down your fear. Pick up your bike. Peddle back.