

Sermon for October 16, 2022

Exodus 19: 3-7; 20: 1-17

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I'm curious – by show of hands – how many of you were let's say *encouraged* to take piano lessons growing up. A sizeable number of you, I'd say. How many of you took piano for more than five years? Interesting. Now forget the lessons – how many of you can simply play piano or any other instrument by ear?

In my household growing up, there were two kinds of people. There were people like my mother and myself, who had taken piano lessons for years – who could sit down and play whatever sheet music was laid in front of you. And then there were people like my father and brother. Some of my happiest memories growing up are of our whole family dancing in our living while my dad played Jerry Lee Lewis on the piano. And I have memory of my brother, who would sit for hours at the piano, just making up whatever songs came into his mind. Now, if you placed sheet music in front of either of them, they would be lost. But they know the instrument, they know the keys that are in front of them and how they relate to each other and because of that, they can make music in their own way. Creatively and freely.

From what I understand, that's kind of how jazz music works. Jazz music is usually based around some framework which the musician or musicians then use to improvise and make their own. And there are different ways that musicians can communicate with one another – there's call and response, where maybe one of the players will sing out or play out a melody, and afterwards the other players respond by echoing their own version back. One woman I know shared a story of a family member of hers who is a drummer who traveled to China and happened upon a tiny jazz bar while he was there. At one point, he was invited to come and play with the band. But the trouble was, none of the local band members spoke English and this drummer certainly couldn't speak Mandarin. But nevertheless, he had an idea. He wanted to try a jazz technique called trading fours – where the musicians trade four measure solos with the drummer. Going out on a limb, he simply raised four fingers in the air to see if they understood and immediately, they all nodded and began playing together, making music that transcended language and speech.

The Ten Commandments which we have as our reading today are like the framework that we have been given – they're like that foundation upon which we develop our song. So often we've been taught to view them in the way I learned to play piano – in a rigid, set your metronome to this beat and play exactly what's on the page kind of way. But there's another way of understanding them. There's a way of understanding them in the light of freedom, which is, after all, the context from which they come. So, rather than being stalwart, dictated rules, instead these ten commandments become keys to liberation.

So let's remember the context: here are these Hebrew people, just recently freed from slavery in Egypt. Here they are, complaining about their newfound freedom because why? They were so used to the rigidity of Egypt. They were used to the rhythm of their lives – to being told how they were to live, each and every moment. To the point where here in the wilderness, here with freedom, they feel lost. They feel uprooted and untethered. And they desperately want direction. They want notes on a page to tell them what to do and when.

Walter Brueggemann has written quite extensively about this pull between the rigidity of Egypt and the freedom of Sinai, and how these commandments help to keep us from sinking back into old slavery. How they help to keep us from falling back into patterns where all we think we are worth is our work. From falling back into patterns where all we think matters is what we produce at the end of the day.

Here in today's reading, God gives the Hebrew people a framework, a foundation, ten commandments that serve as a starting off point from which to live freely and creatively. And they boils down to this: love God and love your neighbor.

Love God – *remember God* – remember who God is and what God has done for you. And then the rest: live out of love for the people around you.

That's your foundation – that's your framework. And the rest, it turns out, is improvisation.

There's a great little story in the Talmud about a nonbeliever who comes to a rabbi looking to convert. First, he approaches Shammai, known as a curmudgeon of a rabbi and says to him, "I will convert if you can teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Offended at this ridiculous request, Shammai takes his cane, raps him on the knuckles and sends him on his way.

But then this nonbeliever goes to the great rabbi Hillel and proposes the same scenario to him. He will convert if the rabbi can teach him the whole of the Torah while he stands on one foot. Hillel, who is often portrayed as a humble and patient man, responds by saying this: "That which is hateful to yourself, do not do to another. That is the whole Torah." He says, "The rest is explanation of this. Go and study it."

You see, part of what makes jazz work is the hours and hours musicians spend at their instrument studying it, learning it, but also making mistakes. Learning to play takes practice and vulnerability. And sometimes it sounds like a mess but other times, well other times it sounds like freedom.

That's what we're given in these ten lessons, these ten words today – we're given the tools for freedom. We're given the framework for what a liberated life looks like and sounds like – the fundamentals to have in our hearts so that we can run with them, so that we can bring life to them.

Love God, love one another. Go and study and sing it into being.

When you think about it, isn't that what this life of faith is about? Isn't it about each of us, grounding ourselves in the framework we've been given, in the fundamentals, and then composing our own song and story as we go. Playing and singing and dancing, together, to the music that comes as a result.

That's what we do here in worship and in Sunday School, in youth group and study groups and PW. We come to get the fundamentals – to study and learn and practice - so that through our service and outreach, through the work of our hands and feet and hearts and minds we can sing the song God has commissioned us to sing.

Next week, four of our young people from here at Harvey Browne will begin the confirmation process. They will go on retreat together and begin their work with Terry and with their mentors. They will study what discipleship means – what following Christ looks like. What this church believes and how that gets expressed.

And through the process, they will be invited to find their song. To find their way of living into this life of faith.

And it may sound different from your song. And it may sound different from mine. But if we have our framework down – if we have our fundamentals in our hearts – then our songs can sing together. And we can fill this world with the kind of life-giving, liberating music it so desperately needs.

Love God and love one another. That's the framework God gives us.

Go now and study so that together, we may find our song.

Amen.