

## THE SINAI COVENANT

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, March 15, 2015  
Fourth Sunday in Lent  
First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT  
“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”*

### **Texts:**

*Exodus 20:1-17 (NRSV, selected & adapted)*

<sup>1</sup>Then God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup>I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

<sup>3</sup>You shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself an idol.

<sup>7</sup>You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.

<sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

<sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother.

<sup>13</sup>You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup>You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup>You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup>You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup>You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

*Romans 13:8-10*

<sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup>The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

<sup>10</sup>Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

*Luke 10:27*

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Last year, on a warm and sunny day, at a cemetery in Milford, after I had officiated at a graveside service, I was sitting on a bench in the shade. Nearby was an unusual gravestone. Engraved at the top was the family name: MAHONY. Below the family name was an image of an open book, with two names inscribed on the facing pages:



Son	Father
Thomas R.	Thomas
1900-1953	1872-1959

On either side, in front of the gravestone, were two metal markers in the shape of firefighters' hats, with the inscription "Fort Trumbull Beach."

As I studied this gravestone, and later returned to the cemetery to take a photo of it, I found myself wondering about the stories that might have been behind these engraved names of father and son. They were both firefighters—did the son follow in his father's footsteps? The son was only 53 when he died—did this happen when he was fighting a fire, or from illness? The father was 80 when his son died—what might the loss of his son and subsequent grief have been like for him? and what about the son's mother? There was no mention of her on the gravestone.

I will never know the stories behind these few words and images inscribed on a gravestone in a Milford cemetery. But I do know that somebody arranged for this gravestone to serve as a long lasting memorial honoring two men, father and son, who served as first responders in the city of Milford in the first half of the twentieth century.

I want to turn our attention now to another stone, actually two stones, with words inscribed on them. I have in mind the two stone tablets on which God inscribed the Ten Commandments, the two stone tablets that Moses brought with him when he descended from the summit of Mount Sinai.



There's a longstanding tradition that says that the commandments engraved on these two stone tablets consisted of ten Hebrew verbs, ten words that outlined the chosen people's responsibilities to God (five verbs on one of the tablets) and to one another (five verbs on the other tablet). There's also a longstanding and rich and complex and fascinating story behind these ten words inscribed on two stone tablets.

The story begins in the life of a people whose ancestors had been honored immigrants who were invited by Pharaoh to make their home in Egypt. There came a time in the life of this people when a new Pharaoh came to power in Egypt, and instead of honoring these descendants of immigrants, this new Pharaoh resolved to enslave them. They were hard workers, but the harder they worked, the more he oppressed them. The people cried out to God for deliverance, and God called Moses to confront Pharaoh and ultimately to lead the people out of Egypt and into the wilderness.

Just three months after their harrowing escape from Egypt, the people camped at the base of Mt Sinai, where God had first appeared to Moses. Now it was Moses' task to ascend to the summit of this holy mountain, so that he could bring a message directly from God to the people. This was the message: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Exodus 19:4-5). And the people all answered as one: "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do" (19:8).

Having heard the people's unanimous yes to the covenant, God summoned Moses once again to the summit of Mt. Sinai, which now was covered in thunder and lightning, to receive from God the basic principles by which this newly-liberated people would be expected to govern themselves. Moses brought down from the mountain ten words, ten commandments, which would form the basis of Israel's covenant with God—Israel's legal and political and religious life.

The biblical story in which these ten words are embedded is thus a story of oppression and liberation. It's a story of promise and fulfillment. It's a story of memory and hope. It's a story of the emergence of a covenant community of blessing in the midst of a wilderness journey. It's a story of God working through (and with) human beings (like us)—flawed and broken though they were—to help them find more life-giving paths, for themselves and for others. It's a story in which God expects us to play a similar role in our time and place.

The biblical story in which the ten words is embedded is also a story of longing and disappointment. Moses and the prophets, Jesus and his first followers, all gave heart and soul and mind and strength to doing the will of God on earth. Like Moses and the prophets, like Jesus and his first followers, you and I are both waiting and working for God's will to be done on earth. We are waiting for swords to be beaten into plowshares. We are longing for the lion to lie down with the lamb. We are hungering and thirsting for that day when sharing by all will mean scarcity for none. And while we are waiting, we are also working to be faithful to God's covenant with us.

The Ten Commandments, in the words of biblical scholar Terence Fretheim, "are an integral part of the covenant between God and people at Mount Sinai. This covenant is a specific covenant *within* the already existing covenant with Abraham [and Sarah]. The Sinai covenant does not establish the

relationship between Israel and God. Israel has long been God's people when Sinai happens...

"These commandments," Terence Fretheim continues, "are given to an already elected, redeemed, believing, and worshiping community. They have to do with the shape of daily life on the part of those already in relationship with God. The commandments give shape to Israel's *vocation*."<sup>1</sup>

The vocation of Israel, the ultimate purpose of God's covenant with Israel, is that Israel will become the kind of human community that will be a light to the rest of the world, a blessing for all the families of the earth. This is the very same purpose of God's covenant with the church: that we Christians will also become the kind of community that will be a light to the rest of the world, a blessing for all the families of the earth.

The two stone tablets represent what are often called the two categories of God's commandments: the spiritual and the moral, the religious and the ethical. The one tablet, which contains the first five of the ten words, is all about our relationship with God. And the other tablet, which contains the remaining five words, is all about our relationships with one another. To use Jesus' formulation, the spiritual tablet is about loving God with all our being; and the moral tablet is about loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Later today, a group from this church will be engaging in love of neighbor by serving a meal at Harvest House in East Haddam. Harvest House "was begun by a group of volunteers in early 2009 as a community outreach program of several local churches. In a short time it has grown to include participation from secular and religious groups both from East Haddam and neighboring towns." All these groups take turns providing a free dinner every Sunday for anyone from the community (<http://easthaddamharvesthouse.org/>).

The word, and the words, of God give shape to the vocation of the church as a community of care. Not only does the word of God command us not to do harm to one another. The word of God also commands us to seek one another's well-being. In Paul's formulation, the only thing we owe to one another is the greatest thing: to love one another. In Jesus' words, everything having to do with the moral law of God is based on the command to love one's neighbor as oneself.

But perhaps the most important thing to remember about these commandments, about these "ten words," is their narrative context. The Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, is above all else a story: it is the story of God's gracious covenantal relationship with a particular people, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

The New Testament is about the continuation of this story, first through Jesus and his Jewish followers, and then through Gentile followers like ourselves, who have been "grafted...into [the] cultivated olive tree" that is Israel

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, "Commentary on Exodus 20:1-17" (March 8, 2015), [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2368](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2368). Accessed March 11, 2015.

(Romans 11:24). God has entered into this gracious covenantal relationship with us so that we too might be a source of blessing for all the families of the earth.

The Sinai covenant, embedded as it is in the story of liberation and wilderness and promised land, is not only, or not simply, a memory of a time long ago in a land far away. The Sinai covenant, established by God with a people on their long journey through the wilderness, is a present reality for us in our world as well.

For you in this church are also on journey, through the wilderness of transition. Like the people of long ago, you are on your way to discovering a new identity and vocation, a new sense of mission and vision. You are “already [a] redeemed, believing, and worshiping community,” created both by divine grace and human work. You embody your care for one another, and your care for the wider community, in many and various ways.

The challenges you face, both now and in the future, are emerging from the changed, and changing, social and cultural context in which you are called to live out your vocation. In the words of the poet James Russell Lowell, “New occasions teach new duties/Time makes ancient good uncouth.”

On this journey of transition on which we have embarked together, let us therefore trust that God is still at work in our midst. Let us acknowledge that God may have yet more light and truth to bring to our journey. Let us be assured that God is still faithful to God's covenant with us. Let us be confident that God is helping us write a new chapter in the story of this unique and precious beloved