Exodus 20: 1-20 & Matthew 21: 33-46
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 4, 2026
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Here's a question that I've wondered and maybe you have too at one time or another: how do you raise a good human? Or perhaps you've speculated about a larger version: how do you create a caring community? Nowadays, people are starting to ask a new variant: how do you teach an AI agent morals? In our conversations here on Wednesday nights, we've been passing around articles and links about AI leaders huddling with religious leaders to try to figure out how to teach Claude and other bots to make good choices; though many point out that it's a little late in the game to "tack on" an ethical sensibility at this stage. Meanwhile, mothers across my social media feeds are trying to figure out how to shape the hearts and minds of sons to be not just respectful of women, but daring in their compassion. Again, it's too late when you drop them off at college to say "be good." No, you really do need to start early, at the very beginning.

But even when you start at the beginning, there's still the question of how - how to instill values and a moral code? How to inculcate a sense of right and wrong in a person or in a community of persons? We have at least two possible answers to that question today. One way is to make rules, say ten strong laws establishing a baseline of behavior. And it is very early in the formation of God's people, as these wandering tribes make their way toward the Promised Land, that they are given a set of commandments to guide and shape their lives, individually and together. Rules: do this; you shall not do that; this seems a logical way to create a culture with shared principles and values.

Rules are just one way to teach people how to live, though. Jesus, in line with many of the prophets who sought to shape the lives of God's people for centuries, leans not on lists of laws but on storytelling to help people understand and take those laws to heart. Today's story is about a group of people who, as my Tuesday morning Bible study friends pointed out, seem to break almost all ten commandments in one tale. This made-up story, though, is to help real-life listeners comprehend how we are all bound up together, how we are all culpable, how we all must reckon with our choices, and how it's not just enough to know the rules, but to let them guide our actions and make us who we are. Stories as teaching tools work because they invite us to imagine our own choices depending on how we place ourselves in the narrative.

So, rules are helpful, and stories can be clarifying; still, I said we had "at least two ways" on display this morning. I believe a third method weaves through both of our lessons, a method embedded in both the laws and the parables. There's a hint in the very first line. Did you notice the very first line of the commandments doesn't actually sound like a rule? "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." What happens in the initial five words is that the rules to come are built on top of a central and defining relationship, "*I am the LORD your God:*" a relationship with God, and a particular God at that. This God is the God of freedom and liberation; interesting to hold that liberating identity in mind while we're talking about handing down the boundaries of behavior. But once that relationship is established, set as a cornerstone, you might say, all the rules that follow define and describe the

relationships between God's people and God, and between God's people and each other, and between God's people and creation. Granted, some of these relationships and responsibilities become even more clear when you read past the ten famous commandments and dig into the complexity of the six hundred-some-odd laws that follow, but that's for another day.

Because there's also the story that Jesus told. It was also all about relationships - vividly what broken relationships look like. The story's characters' character is revealed as disrespectful at best and violent at worst. They can't see the humans in front of them as anything more than hurdles to get what they want, and certainly not as bearers of God's image. Without any sense of kinship, they covet, lie, steal, and murder. Having seemingly lost a connection with an emancipating God, they are trapped inside a brutal cycle of violence. Their relationships are so warped and objectified that it doesn't matter how many rules they've memorized; the fruit in that kingdom will be rotten.

So, chatbots or children, desert-wandering tribes or vineyard tenants, what we all want to know is how to be good. And maybe even, how to want to do the good. What is the cornerstone upon which we can build flourishing, compassionate, just, and merciful lives? I think we need rules and stories, but rules and stories that remind us of the foundational relationships that construct our lives. We are not walking through this world as automatons, and we are not alone here. The choices we make have everything to do with how we see the person in front of us, whether they've come to collect the rent or shown up at a party.

And though it can sometimes be the hardest bond to see, remembering that we are in relationship with one loving and liberating God; this is the ground of the kingdom. Pope Leo wrote in his spring encyclical about humanity and technology, "What saves humanity is not enhanced self-sufficiency, but a relationship that liberates, a communion that transforms." We are the people who believe in a particular God, the one who said, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The habits and actions of everyday life ought to spring from an understanding that we are God's people, rescued and delivered together to a land of promise. At the center of our lives is a God interested in our freedom from bondage, giving us a way to live freely as a community in which we are bound to each other.

The stories and the laws help us reimagine these relationships, and the relationships then help us reimagine the laws and the stories. Minister and writer Matthew Myer Boulton puts it like this, *"Once these 'commandments' are heard in [a] loving, relational way, they become less a list of imperatives and more a … description of what graceful, dignified human life looks like. In this way, the famous refrain "you shall not" may ring not as an imperious injunction, but rather as a vivid portrait of a fruitful garden, as if God is saying: When you humbly walk with me in justice and kindness, you shall not murder, you shall not lie, you shall not steal…"*

We are bound up with God, and we are bound up with all that God loves - this whole world and the people in it. And so, yes, to be a good human is about following the laws, and it does mean learning from the cautionary tales we hear about others. But ultimately, at least one meaningful way to make good humans - to be good humans - is to remind ourselves and each other that we are in relationship with, that we are loved by a very good God, and then see what kind of life can be built on that cornerstone.