

Rules of Life
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
October 11, 2015

Deuteronomy 5:1-21; 6:4-9

What would you say are the rules of your household?

When I was growing up, one of my mother's most serious rules was this: take your shoes off at the door. You see, my childhood home had off-white wall to wall shag carpet. As active, nearly feral children, my brother and I spent lots of time in the woods surrounding our home. You can imagine the dirt we tracked in.

To this day, whenever I visit someone I feel very uncomfortable if I'm told that I can keep my shoes on. My instinct is to take them off and leave them at the door. When I keep my shoes on, it feels like my mom is going to come around the corner with that look of disapproval that only moms can muster and I'll get busted.

Now that I am older, I know how important it is to have some rules in the house; they provide structure and boundaries and help everyone feel safe. When our kids were younger, the rules were simple – for example - brush your teeth each morning and night. Now that they are older, the rules have shifted – like – no cell phones at family dinner. It seems like this is the one that is hardest for me to obey!

We tend to think of the Ten Commandments as a list of God's House Rules. And we take them seriously, because the fear is that if we dare to disobey them we might be smited... (or is it, smote?!). So we better behave... or else.

The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses' "farewell address," if you will, to the nation of Israel. And the passage we heard is like a "second telling" of this list of rules that originally appeared in the Book of Exodus.

It's been about 40 years since the burning bush called Moses to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt. After crossing the Red Sea, they came to Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, and he in turn gave them to the Israelites.

And the people said, "*All that the Lord has spoken, we will do.*" But that didn't last long. So Moses went back up the mountain for further instructions, and while he was up there, the people grew impatient. Their faith wavered then evaporated. They built a golden calf to worship, thinking God wasn't doing a very good job of being God.

Later, the Israelites sent out some spies to check out the land that they believed God had promised to them. But most of the spies brought back a bad report, thinking that the people living there would be too strong for them to drive out. So that whole generation would wander 40 years in the wilderness never entering the Promised Land, because of their fear.

In our reading for today, Moses is reviewing everything with the next generation, the ones who would enter the Promised Land very shortly. He's teaching them well, going over all the commandments and the covenant that God made with Israel.

Moses tried to help them understand that there was life and blessing in following these commandments. In them, the Lord has given them a good way to live. The God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who established his covenant of blessing and promise with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel who heard the cries of his people and remembered his covenant and brought them out of bondage and to the Promised Land—this same gracious God knows what is best, and you will be blest to listen to God's voice and to walk in God's ways.

But just like the Israelites, we think we know better. We think that these commandments are too restrictive, too archaic, they don't really meet our needs in the modern world, that they spoil our fun, so we resist.

We know that keeping these commandments is not how we get right with God. That's not how we make ourselves righteous or earn our way into God's favor. In a way, that was the delusion of the scribes and the Pharisees. They thought that by strictly following these rules, they would show their righteousness.

I think that Jesus would say to them... not so fast. If keeping these commandments is just an external show, you're not quite doing it right.

For example, most of us in this room (I'd wager) haven't actually murdered anybody, and yet, perhaps some among us have been malicious or hateful

towards others. Well, not killing the body while killing someone's spirit is a pretty rotten thing too.

I think the commandment we struggle with the most may be that one about taking sabbath. I know I cheat on this all the time. Just one more e-mail... just one more phone call... if I do this one thing, it'll make coming into the office on Monday so much easier... I can always rest later. God's people need me!!!

But then, while ironically writing this sermon on my day off I came upon a review of a book called *"The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves"* by Dan Ariely.

The author's main assertion seems to be a fairly intuitive one: everybody cheats on various levels, and we have lots of ways to rationalize it. In the final chapter, he addresses the role of religion in matters of honesty and integrity, and he writes:

"I asked Rabbi [Jonathan] Sacks to tell me which of the Ten Commandments I should keep, if I were going to focus on just one. It was another way of asking him which commandment is the most important one. What do you think his answer was? The one about not worshipping idols? The one about murder?"

His answer wasn't at all what I expected— he said that if I kept only one commandment, I should observe Shabbat (which is the Hebrew word for Sabbath). "If you keep Shabbat as a day of rest and reflection," he said, "the rest of the commandments will most likely follow."

Sabbath affects those who observe it in a few ways. First, it offers us an opportunity to stop and reflect. In observing this day, we can remind ourselves what we have done in the last week, what we want to do next week, and what our true values are. We can pay attention to our less-than-perfect behaviors that otherwise might go unnoticed, keeping ourselves from sliding accidentally into moral dangers.

This is reflective work, which may be exactly why so many of us resist it. Who really wants to be confronted with all of our stuff!?

But there's more, he goes on to write:

"The second way Shabbat propels people to observe the other commandments is by restoring our moral energy. It's no secret that at the end of a day or week, people often let loose (getting drunk and so on) by

allowing themselves to do what their impulsive id-side has been screaming for while they were stuck in their cubicles. So having a time of rest gives us a spiritual reset, so our personal integrity and sense of self-control isn't working out of deficit."

Ariely goes on to suggest that the financial meltdown from several years ago and scandals such as Enron, Madoff and the like are a direct result of the financial sector's refusal to take time off. By not taking a rest and making time for self-reflection we become more likely to make not only catastrophic but downright dishonest decisions. A culture of overwork creates a ripe environment for dishonesty and oppression.

Among industrialized nations, we in the United States are notoriously bad about providing enough paid time off, family and sick leave and the like. This lack of rest doesn't just make us sick, tired, less creative and less productive; it can actually contribute to a sense of moral decay.

God's Law is, above all else, a gift that is meant to enable and further life. It's not meant to be a means to salvation. And Moses did not receive the law as a way to establish a relationship between God and God's people. The relationship came first.

Which leads me to my final thought for today... It isn't about "us," per se. God does not give you and me the law in order to perfect us or even to make us a better "you" or a better "me." The law is really about our neighbors. We are given these rules to follow, not so that we can get more spiritual or have our best life now, but so our neighbor can have their best life now by living in a safe, respectful, loving community – which is all of our responsibility.

These laws are a good design for how we should live. They are the way of love, love for God and love for our neighbor, even love for ourselves. And life just seems to work so much better when we live this way. Amen.