

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“The Mighty Acts of God: R.E.S.P.E.C.T.”  
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Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 22:36-40

He lost it. My father just lost it. In order to understand why this matters, you have to understand that my father was, and is, one of the quietest, least volatile and grounded men I have ever known. He never lost his temper. He seldom even got angry. Yet one night at the dinner table he lost it. He lost it because I said something snarky to my mother. I was one of those teens who often spoke before putting the brain in gear. The instant the words left my mouth, my father's voice rose and he thundered that I would never speak to my mother in that manner and that I would apologize that instant. Though I suppose I had known all along that this was not appropriate behavior, my father made it clear that one of our family rules was that we were not to say hurtful things to our mother. Family rules...how many of you had them growing up? How many of you had the same kind of rule that I had about how you could or could not address your parents? Right, so what I want you to do this morning is to organize your mind around the idea of family rules because that is what we are presented with this morning in this Exodus text; God's family rules.

I realize that for many of us, the Ten Commandments, or as they are sometime referred to, the Ten Words, are laws, not simply family rules. Yet, I would argue that they are family rules and not some set of generic rules like Hammurabi's Code or even a universal set of religious laws. I say this because they are the rules God gave to Israel, and to no one else, in order that Israel become the kind of family God desired them to be; and by extension that we become the kind of community God desires us to be. The Hebrew people needed these family rules because the only family rules that they had as they entered the wilderness were Egyptian family rules; rules that were based on power, privilege, slavery and oppression. They were rules that had people worshipping multiple gods including Pharaoh himself. God had a different vision for the kind of family God wanted to create and so God gives the people a set of 613 family rules. As Rev. Joanne said a couple of weeks ago, it was going to be impossible for people to keep all of these family rules. So, the question becomes can we find an easy way to sum them up? There is, and it is contained in a single Aretha's word...R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

I realize that using the word respect may seem a bit odd considering that Jesus, when asked to sum up the law does so using the word love. You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And then You shall love your neighbor as yourself. So why I am using respect? I am doing so for three reasons. First, I think that we use love God and neighbor so much that it has become no more than background noise. Oh yeah, we are to love God and neighbor, yawn. Second, I am using it because love carries with it so much baggage that is often hard for us to get at the heart of what it means to love God and neighbor. Does it mean we have to have an emotional attachment; do we have to feel loving? Finally, I am using respect because the word carries within it the essence of what loving God and neighbor is all about, which I hope we will see as we continue. So here goes.

First, we are to respect God. Here, I am defining respect as *giving honor, reverence and deference*. One of the interesting things about the Bible, which we often miss, is that God always gives God's people reasons to be respectful to God's own self; to give God honor, reverence and deference. God never says, I

am God and you are not, so bow down, and grovel. Instead God always sets the idea of respecting God's self in the history of the mighty acts of God, with and for God's people. In this case, all family rules are offered in the context, as noted in verse one, that God is the one who brought the people out of captivity in Egypt. In other words, God's people are to respect God because God has earned their respect, by setting them free. For us as Christians we are to honor God for the same reason, that God has set us free from the power of sin to corrupt our lives, and freed us to become the people God desires us to be. The gift of giving respect to God then is that it orients us toward the steadfast love, the covenant faithfulness, of God that is continually liberating us to be God's family of compassion and care.

Second, we are to respect others. This is the second half of this section of God's family rules. Here I am using the definition of respect as *having due regard for the feelings, wishes, rights, or traditions of others*. Again, just as respect for God was based in God's earning respect through God's liberating actions, this respect toward others is based in the belief that all human beings are children of God, created equally by God. This is a concept emerging out of the creation story; that God created all people equally. None is greater than the other. We can see this in the way Israel was organized. There was no hierarchy. Though there were priests and leaders, they were not to lord it over others. They simply had different tasks. Even kings were only present to ensure that equality reigned. Thus, all were due respect because all were equal. This respect then leads to people maintaining the integrity of others' lives, property, relationships and families because no one had the right or position to do otherwise. By giving due regard, appropriate boundaries were created, insuring that the family did not dissolve into chaos.

I began by talking about family rules; about how the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Torah are not generic laws, but are family rules, intended to mold God's people into a particular kind of respectful, loving family. What this means is that the Commandments were never intended to be imposed on others. What that does not mean is that at least a portion of them were intended to be extended toward others. One of the key understandings of God's family rules is that the respect shown to those within the community, the respect shown to our family members, is also intended to be shown to those outside the family. The Torah makes it clear that respect is to be shown to strangers and sojourners. Jesus makes this clear, when he is asked about who our neighbors are, and he responds by the telling the story of the good Samaritan. By which Jesus lets us know that our respect is to be given to all that we encounter. The reason for this is the same reason that we are to give respect to those inside the community; we are all children of God, made in the image of the creator. And our membership in the family does not make us any better than those who are outsiders.

Before I close I want to speak to this moment in which we find ourselves. We find ourselves in a moment in which people are finally speaking out about sexual harassment and family violence. This includes verbal, emotional, sexual and physical violence both in the home and in the work place. As children of God, whose family rule is that of respect; respecting the integrity of all other human beings, these actions are unacceptable. They are directly contrary to the rules that God has set before us and of the love that Jesus asks of us all. Therefore I hope all you will work toward making our homes and our communities, zones of R.E.S.P.E.C.T.; zones in which all human beings can discover the respect that they deserve.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T. is what we are to give God and to give to all of those around us; attuning our hearts and ears to God and living as God directs; and respecting the rights and integrity of others. My challenge to you then in this week is this, to repeat this phrase, "R.E.S.P.E.C.T. this is what God expects of me." And then asking yourselves, how am I showing the respect God calls upon me to offer throughout my week.