

God Restores, We Witness

Exodus 20:1-17

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One of my best friends in high school was Rudy Will. Rudy was an artist with great intellectual curiosity, but his family situation wasn't ideal. His parents had divorced. His mother was not around and his father married another woman and moved into her home, leaving Rudy basically alone as a teenager.

There got to be something of a routine at our house. At least once a week, around 5 p.m., the doorbell would ring and it would be Rudy. We'd hang out in the den playing pool or watching tv and Mom would come in and ask Rudy if he wanted to stay for dinner. He always tried to get out of it, but Mom would always insist, and he would stay and eat with us.

Mom knew it was an act. She knew that he was coming over for dinner because he didn't have anyone to fix dinner for him. But she never let on like she knew. Each time she went through the same routine of insisting that he stay, like it was her idea. Mom even got used to making sure to plan for an extra person to feed.

A few months after I went off to college, Mom told me one day that she had prepared herself for my leaving home, but what she had not planned for was how empty the house was because none of my friends were dropping by like they always had. And she especially missed Rudy, who had become a part of our routine.

Rudy became a part of my family. That relationship was built upon the practice of hospitality, as my mother welcomed him into our home and shared our meals with him. What surprised my mother was how much Rudy's presence had blessed her. She thought she was the one doing the blessing. It was only after he moved away that she realized how much his presence had meant to her.

Rudy grew up Missouri Synod Lutheran and, despite his family situation, he continued to be a faithful member of his local church throughout high school. It was because of his religious commitment that I understood the significance of the gift that Rudy gave me at the end of high school. It was his personal copy of Martin Luther's Small Catechism with his name engraved on the front cover. He used it during his confirmation, so throughout there are his own handwritten notes.

Whenever I look at this catechism, I think of Rudy and our friendship. He now lives in Alabama with his wife and son. He is a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan and every week we e-mail back and forth discussing all the ways the world is screwed up.

In the early days of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther realized that it was not enough to simply re-train the pastors and teachers. He needed to educate the children. So, the Lutherans were the first to develop an extensive literature of Christian education materials for children. Luther's own contribution was the Small Catechism. He wrote it not only for use in

the church, but for use in the home. At least once a week, fathers were supposed to check up on their children's spiritual formation by asking them the questions contained in the catechism.

It opens with the Ten Commandments. These are the very first things that any Christian child should learn because these principles are key to living the Christian life. The catechism lists each commandment after which a child's parent is supposed to ask this question, "What does this mean?" Then, the catechism gives an example of the sort of answer that one should give in response. For example:

The Fifth Commandment. Do not murder. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need.

For each and every one of the Ten Commandments, Luther expands the negative law into a positive practice. Not only are we not to murder, we are also supposed to "help and befriend [our neighbor] in every bodily need." Luther doesn't just see a list of things we aren't supposed to do, he goes behind that list to discover the things which we ought to do.

Not committing adultery becomes loving and honoring your spouse. Not stealing becomes helping your neighbor to improve and protect his property and business. Not bearing false witness is expanded to defending your neighbor, speaking well of her, putting the best construction on everything. Not coveting your neighbor's property becomes helping and being of service to her in keeping it.

Luther understood something of fundamental importance about the Ten Commandments—They aren't a list of arbitrary rules; they actually exist for a purpose. They help us to achieve some goal. What is that purpose? What goal do they help us to achieve?

Well, let's step back and ask a wider question. Why has God liberated the Israelites? God heard their cry and knew their pain. God called Moses to be the prophet and leader of the people. Then, with a show of great power, God defeated the Egyptians and led the people out of Egypt, parting the sea so that they might cross over in safety. Why go to all that trouble?

God's purpose was to restore creation. Pharaoh was a threat to life. And so we have a contest between the forces of chaos & death, life & blessing. God has won, and now creation can be restored.

But how is God going to do this? The answer is "by the formation of a new people." The Israelites are to be God's agents in bringing the world back to what God intended the world to be. The people of God will be God's means to deliverance and salvation for the entire world.

But now we must ask, "How are the Israelites going to do that?"

They will do it by living differently than other people, and in their living differently they will bear witness to God's will.

The 613 laws that God gives them, of which these are only ten, are intended to shape them into a new people who will change the world. The purpose of the law, then, isn't just to create some rules for everyone to follow. The purpose of the law is salvation.

That salvation will come through relationships -- the relationships that the people have with one another and the relationships that they have with God. God will be part of this

community, their partner and companion.

The Ten Commandments, then, reveal what practices are necessary to create the sort of relationships that will restore the world. Martin Luther gets this. Not murdering is only a starting point. If we love God, then we will go beyond that to befriend our neighbor and help him with all his bodily needs. And, as my mother learned, her hospitality and generosity built a relationship with Rudy that blessed her.

It's a mistake when we use the Ten Commandments as a set of rules to beat people up and make them feel guilty. The purpose of these commandments is to challenge us to live as companions with God and one another. The commandments are an invitation to a relationship—a relationship with an adventurous purpose: to change the world. Our obedience to the laws of God lead to the salvation of the world.

Our community here at First Central should be a witness that the world can be a different than it is currently is. The world truly can be a place of extravagant grace, radical inclusion, and relentless compassion.

May this Exodus story, which tells God's story, also become *our* story. May it give us an identity. May it give us the courage to face the Pharaohs in our lives. May it set us free from the forces of chaos which would enslave us. And may we continue to live in a radically different way both for our own salvation and for the salvation of the rest of the world.