

God, the Law-Giver
Deuteronomy 5:1-21
October 8, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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When I was growing up, I learned some very important rules about what it meant to be a member of my family.

Rule #1: Root for the Cowboys. In my teenage years, that meant Coach Tom Landry, quarterback Roger Staubach, and the Doomsday Defense. We watched a lot of really great football. And there was no question who anyone in my family rooted for. Any suggestion of preference for another team would be sacrilege. We rooted for the Cowboys. Period.

Rule #1A: For college football, root for the Texas Longhorns. It's what we do.

Rule #2: Take school seriously. I don't think anyone ever said that to me directly, but they didn't have to. I knew that my parents cared about the grades I brought home, so I learned to bring home good grades. Other families valued sports skills in their children, but not my family. For my parents, reading and learning were most important. Sports were just what we watched on Sunday afternoon. (See Rule #1 about rooting for the Cowboys.)

Rule #3: Christmas is a big deal, and everyone has to be here for it. It was famous in my family that my father never missed celebrating a Christmas with his mom. Ever. During World War II, when he was in the Navy, my dad actually went AWOL from sick bay in Gulfport, Mississippi, to ride the train for 24 hours to get home to see his mom on Christmas morning. Two hours later, he turned around and rode the train back again. Looking back on it now, that seems a little extreme to me. But that story was powerful in shaping my own expectations of what it meant to be a member of my family at Christmas time. I had better show up.

Rule #4: Use Grandmother's recipe for Thanksgiving dressing. Do not even consider experimenting with it. Learning to make my grandmother's cornbread dressing was a rite of passage for young women in my family. It is a treasure I passed on to my daughter Anna, along with the huge dressing bowl that I used all the time she was growing up. No white bread stuffing for us. Only cornbread dressing in this family.

Rule #5: Go to church every week. Put something in the offering plate whenever it passes. Volunteer to do the work. I learned really early that being a member my family meant taking part in all aspects of church life. I watched my grandmother teaching Sunday School and singing in the choir. I saw my father serve as an elder. So, I sang in the children's choir, too, and then the junior choir, and by the time I was in middle school, I was singing at two services each week. When I was in high school, I taught in Vacation Bible School. By the time I was an adult, I was working on committees. Even when I was little it was obvious to me that I had an important part to play in my church family, and it always gave me joy to be part of God's work in my little world. It was one of the things my family expected of me.

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Learning family rules, even – or especially – the unspoken ones, is a huge part of what makes us a family. We are different from our neighbors, in part because they follow different rules. The family rules we live by help to form our identity. They make us who we are.

What are the unspoken rules you grew up with in your family? I hope you will share some of them with me this week.

Shared rules can also keep us safe. Don't touch that hot stove. Look both ways before you cross the street. Someone wrote on Facebook this week: The cutest thing is when you encounter a toddler in the wild, and they try to help you. So, you have to kneel there and nod very seriously while they explain to you about traffic or holding hands. Even little children understand that the giving and receiving of rules can be an act of love between a care giver and one who needs care.

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This fall we have been focusing on the great turning points in God's relationship with humankind, or -- more properly -- the people's emerging understanding of their relationship with God. We heard the story of Creation, of humankind made in God's image, and then God's delegation to us of the stewardship of all that God had created. Then we heard about the flood, and God's promise to Noah, symbolized by the rainbow, to always treat humankind with loving kindness, no matter how far we go astray. Next, we heard the story of God's covenant with Abraham, in which God promised to give him the land of Canaan and myriad descendants to fill it. In return, Abraham promised to go where God called him and to worship only the Lord.

Today, we come to the covenant delivered through Moses to all the people of Israel on Mt. Sinai, symbolized by the Ten Commandments -- the law. Like the rules we all grew up with in our families, these Commandments are about relationships: They reflect the relationship between God and the people, and they guide the people's relationships with one another. And so, I love that the Commandments begin with a reminder of the relationship that already exists. The First Commandment begins, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." We already have this relationship, God is saying. I have been taking care of you for a very long time. Not just taking care of your ancestors. I have been taking care of you. Once you were a slave in a foreign land. Now you are free. I did that for you. Even little children understand that the giving and receiving of rules can be an act of love between a care giver and one who needs care.

The first four Commandments -- the first table of the Law -- are all about loving and worshiping God. Don't worship idols. Honor the Sabbath. The last six Commandments -- the second table of the Law -- are simple rules for living in community, to keep us safe and in peace with one another. Don't murder. Don't steal. Don't lie or covet what is not yours. The Commandments are easily summarized in the way you have heard so often: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

This is what it means for Israel to be a holy people. Honor and worship only the Lord your God. Live honorably and in peace with your neighbors, because they are also children of God. If you can manage to do those things, and to understand these rules as loving gifts of God that define who you are, then everyday life can be an act of sacred praise.

Learning family rules is a huge part of what makes us a family. So, how do we know that we are part of the family of God? As in any family, we have expectations here that define us and teach us, that make us a little different from our neighbors. Because, no matter which football team we root for, in this church, we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and we love our neighbors as ourselves. It's just what our family does. It is what we teach our children. It is how we know that this is where we belong.

Thanks be to God.
Amen