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3/4/18--University Presbyterian Church
Exodus 20:1-17

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN THE AGE OF COMMODIFICATION

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade transported between 12 and 15 million African men, women, and children to the Americas to serve as slaves. Robbed of their humanity, these individuals were bought, sold, shipped, and used as commodities. Commodification is when we turn something or someone into a commercial product, a mere commodity that is regarded for its utilitarian purpose. Slavery is the ultimate example of commodification taken to its most sinister extreme, where human beings are turned into commercial products for the enrichment or pleasure of others. Lest we think slavery is a problem that existed in the past, regular news stories about the global rise of human trafficking reveal to us that the commodification of people still continues today. In these cases, individuals are often lured into situations where they are promised work maybe in another country, but then find themselves caught in a modern form of slavery where their handlers compel them into various kinds of forced labor or the commercial sex industry. The tragic story this summer of the 10 immigrants whose bodies were discovered locked in a San Antonio tractor-trailer in a Walmart parking lot, dead from heat exhaustion, reveals that human beings are still shipped like commercial products, still exploited for their utilitarian value.

Slavery and its underlying premise of the commodification, is the very issue that gave rise to the Ten Commandments. Perhaps you will recall that Moses and his people to whom God gave the Ten Commandments, had themselves just escaped slavery in Egypt. With Moses' help, the people had fled their brutal enslavement, had crossed through the Red Sea, and now found themselves as free people, wandering in the wilderness. Eventually they would find a new

homeland. But before that happened, God gifted them with the law, what we call the Ten Commandments. These laws were considered a gift, a gift from God to a people who were still wounded and battered from their years of bondage, so that they could know a new kind of freedom.

Now often our way of thinking is that laws restrict freedoms. But actually, it can be just the opposite. Absence of restraint is not freedom but bondage. Think about young children you may have encountered who are not given any rules or restraints by their permissive parents, who are left to behave any way they want. Not only do we not want to be around such children, they don't much like being around themselves. Such children behave in chaotic, out-of-control ways. They are in bondage to an unrestrained permissiveness. But given parameters, given reasonable restraints, their behavior improves and they are actually happier children. They are freed from the chaos that had ruled their minds and hearts.

The Ten Commandments arose out of a situation of bondage, were given to a people damaged by bondage, and were intended for their freedom. And these Commandments not only *arose* from circumstances of slavery, the Commandments themselves *address* the issue of slavery.

Now, that may puzzle you. You may think to yourself, "I don't recall any commandment that addresses slavery." There is talk about not committing adultery. There is talk about not stealing or killing. There is talk about remembering the Sabbath and not taking the Lord's name in vain. But where is there any prohibition against slavery? Well it's there. It's there lying just behind the scenes. Because at the root of slavery is this issue of commodification: of turning our relationships with others into commodities, to be used or exploited by us for our gain. And that is what the Ten Commandments protect against: against the commodification of our relationships

with one another and our relationship with our God. To a people who themselves knew the pain of being commodified, God gave a law to protect them from the dangers of commodification and to help them order their lives together so that they may enjoy meaningful freedom.

And we surely need that protection ourselves. Because we are enslaved to a consuming culture that regards everything and everyone as a commodity. You and I are the consumer and every possible institution is out there attempting to buy our loyalties and use us for profit. We are mined for our personal data, for our buying habits, for our preferences, for our voting practices, reducing us to mere numbers and statistics intended for someone else's utilitarian purposes. Those bonus cards issued at the grocery store or drug store aren't issued to us just so we can save money--that's the hook to draw us in. They're issued to us so the company can track our buying habits and can better market to us. Stop by the local store to buy milk and bread and after you pay you are likely to be asked to go on-line and rate your experience. Does every human interaction have to be quantified?

Not only do we become the means to someone else's end, but we are also encouraged to look at the world around us through the eyes of a consumer, to find our ultimate meaning and fulfillment through the consumption of goods and services. And so we shop as a form of entertainment. And we network with others in order to make useful contacts. And we buy cheap products that can be thrown away and easily replaced. And we regard our planet for the useful things it can give us. And before too long, we begin to view the world and the people around us for their utilitarian value. We don't always see it for what it is, but this relentless commodification of ourselves and our world is a form of bondage. It holds us captive to a narrow, hurtful, destructive, selfish kind of living.

But God steps into our bondage with the gift--the law. Those Ten Commandments. And everything about the Commandments defies our human tendencies to commodify. Take God's commandment to keep the Sabbath day. Not only is the Sabbath day a day to honor God, a day to remember just who is the Creator and who is the creature, but the commandment to observe the Sabbath directly disrupts the tyranny of productivity. It disrupts the relentlessness of working and producing. It says to us, "You are more than a machine." The Sabbath day commandment for rest demonstrates a deep respect for our humanity. And not just us individually, either. God says that no one is to work on the Sabbath--not your family members, not your employees, not your livestock, not the undocumented farm worker living in the area. The Sabbath day commandment dictates fair labor practices and humane treatment for animals and humans alike. With this commandment, God breaks the vicious cycle of consumption and the bondage that enslaves us to the god of productivity.

Underlying all those commandments that pertain to our relationships with other people is the assertion that humans are not commodities for our use or exploitation but rather they are valued people of God to be treated with dignity and respect and justice.

The commandment to honor our father and mother was primarily directed at adult children regarding their elderly parents and it addresses the problem of what becomes of the elderly when they are no longer able to be productive. Are they no longer valued? Are they forgotten and neglected? In Japan, the numbers of the elderly are so high and so many of them are lonely and neglected that nursing homes have begun using robots to serve as companions for the elderly residents. The residents talk to these robotic animals for comfort and friendship. Social policies and attitudes in this country have not always favored the elderly or anyone for that matter who are not seen as "productive."

The commandment against killing tells us that human life is not a disposable product. Human beings are not expendable. We like to *think* we believe that but our history and practices have told a different story. Some lives have been expendable. Like Native Americans. Like African- Americans. Like Central Americans or any one in any country who stands in the way of people of European ancestry getting what they want. And when they do, they become objects that can be disposed of when deemed necessary.

The other commandments follow a similar thought. Don't bear false witness against another, don't steal, don't covet what your neighbor has because that reduces them to objects that we seek to use or abuse for our personal gain. Adultery not only shatters promises and relationships, it reduces the other individual into an object for personal use or desire. In today's world, the commandment against adultery might be broadened to include all the ways women and girls especially, are exploited and sexualized. Human beings are not commodities.

And neither is our God. Those first commandments, the ones that pertain to God, those also defy our tendencies to commodify. Take the first one: You shall have no other gods before me. Notice that God does not say that there *are* no other gods besides God. At this point in Jewish history, they believed there were indeed lots of other gods but that the Jewish people had been called to be faithful to only one god: Yahweh. And in truth, we too have many other gods, don't we? There are all kinds of other gods we bow before when we don't completely trust the one we are called to worship. There is the god of nationalism, and the god of consumerism. There is the god of individualism--my way, my right. And of course there are the gods we have in our bank accounts, retirement plans, and stock portfolios. The very definition of what makes something a commodity is that we can toss it aside and shop around for something else if we

want. But God says to us, I am not a commodity. You do not get to shop around for something else.

You shall not make for yourself an idol. You don't get to put God in a package of your own making--like Nike or Apple. Don't brand God as an American or as a Democrat or as a Republican. God will not be packaged like some kind of product.

And don't make wrongful use of God's name to further your own agendas, we are told. We have surely seen that in world history--nations who have invoked God's name to justify invasions, colonialism, theft, slavery, murder. God is not to be used as a utilitarian tool to get what you want. God will not be useful in getting you wealth, health, or success, or to further your national interests.

The Ten Commandments were given to a people a long time ago because the problem of commodification is an ancient one. But the degree to which we experience it in our modern times is unprecedented. The alienation of groups within communities, the exploitation of the earth which threatens the planet's very existence, the tensions among nations over natural resources, the personal anxieties and stresses individuals experience point to a world in bondage to a system of living and being that is unhealthy. We have traded freedom for bondage. But the Ten Commandments, with their restraints on human behavior, point the way to freedom. You and I are not just called to follow the Commandments individually in our own lives, but we are called to ensure that these principles are part of social and political policies. Through these ten commandments, God calls us away from relationships based upon leverage and exploitation and into a way of relating to our God, to one another, to our earth and its creatures that is part of a sacred covenant of respect, honor, and justice.