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## *Labors of Love: Obedience Training and the Ten Commandments*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa  
Lent 3 – Year B**

Like some of you, early in the pandemic, my family adopted a dog. A second dog. A big dog. A highly energetic, twelve-month-old bloodhound mix, with no sense of his size or of anyone else's personal space. And apparently with no training. Our efforts, or failures, to train him this year have colored how I'm hearing the Ten Commandments today: as an expression of God's love. Not as requirements for God's love, or justifications for punishment. Not as rules intended to restrict people or exert power, just because God can. But as an expression of God's commitment to relationship, and to the freedom and flourishing of God's beloved people.

That's a big leap, I know, from my new dog to the Ten Commandments! So let me tell you more about Barney. All we know about him before his rescue is from a picture: he was a skinny dog, chained up in what looks like someone's front yard. We fell in love with him at first sight and wanted to give him a good home. And we had big plans: we were going to take him on long walks, play with him for hours a day, let him play with other dog for the other hours of the day, and snuggle with him in the evenings. And we were going to train him well!

But our training went something like this: five different people with different ideas and messages about what he was and wasn't allowed to do. Sometimes, one person giving him five different messages at the same time, which only multiplied his confusion. Then we got busy, and training became less fun, especially when he barked a lot. Or pulled you on a walk or lunged at other dogs. Or took off running. Or snatched food out of your hand—or worse, out of your guest's hand.

After weeks of this, we became less eager to spend that good, focused time with him. Which is sad, because next to eating, what matters most to him is being with his people and making his people happy.

Now, don't worry! We haven't given up. Not at all! We see now that we weren't doing Barney any favors by giving him so many different messages and so few boundaries—that for his well-being, and for our relationship with him, we needed to admit what we didn't know, get clear with him and ourselves, and double-down on training. And that takes time. And a lot of effort. And consistency and persistence and faithfulness. It's a labor of love. And it's a labor we're committed to because we love him, and he is ours.

So, yes, Barney is giving me a new perspective on the Ten Commandments: maybe they, along with all of God's law, are God's labor of love—God's gift of training, or discipline, so that we might have life and have it abundantly. They're part of this great love story of God—an expression of God's desire for relationship and of God's commitment to being with this people, no matter where they go or what they go through.

And it just so happens that they're going through a lot when we get to this point of the story in Exodus. Since the Israelites' dramatic escape from pharaoh, they've been wandering around the wilderness, making their way to the promised land and to becoming a holy nation. But it hasn't been easygoing! They've run out of food and water; they've been attacked by the Amalekites; they've gotten discouraged and complained and wished they'd never left Egypt. But at every turn, God has provided for them, delivered them, and guided them... all the way to the foot of this Mount Sinai. And it's *here*, in the wilderness, while they're *still* being royal pills—it's *here*, on their way to their new home and new identity, that God reveals these Ten Words.

*"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.*” That’s where these laws for their new life begin: with God. With who God is, and what God has done already. God has delivered them from bondage *already*, and claimed them as God’s own *already*. These commandments are not for God, but for these people—for *their* flourishing and freedom.

Now, there are a lot of reasons why we may not be inclined to associate “law” with “freedom.” For one, we may confuse respect for God’s law with legalism: an approach to rules that puts them in the place of God, as if following them could guarantee salvation, or not following them were a sure sign of damnation. As if absolutes could save us from the hairy territory of discernment and dependence on the grace of God.

But the fact is that we can’t interpret or apply these commandments without God’s help, without community, and without the whole story of the Bible, especially the story of Jesus Christ. This was driven home to me when I took a semester-long class on the Ten Commandments in seminary and discovered how much ambiguity there can be in them.

“You shall not murder,” of course, which means you shall value life. But what does that mean in the case of a soldier’s duty, or self-defense? What does that mean when it comes to capital punishment, or indifference to someone whose poverty or abuse will kill them if not interrupted?

Or take the sabbath! What about those who work on Sunday or can’t afford time away? What’s actually allowed on sabbath? Can you fix dinner? Pluck grain? Sabbath has gotten a bad rap as a day of “*thou shalt not*,” or *no*’s. But what if we it’s really a day of *yeses*? What if it’s really about God’s *yes* to us and our *yes* to god? *Yes*, you shall rest. *Yes*, you shall be renewed. *Yes*, *you* shall be free—free to listen to, to worship, the God who frees you from all those other voices that would keep you in bondage.

What if we thought of all the commandments that way: as God’s gift of training. Not “training” as a program of physical or spiritual self-improvement, but rather as focused time together, learning to listen, discerning which voice to heed, and letting God be in charge.

No bones about it: that training can be challenging spiritual work! If you’ve ever tried to keep sabbath, you’ve probably found yourself getting distracted or running away. In fact, if you really think about the commandments, you realize that there’s no way to keep them perfectly. “You shall not covet?” Really?!

But God is persistent, consistent, and faithful—and never gives up on us. So even our inability to fulfill the commandments perfectly becomes another means of grace. When we trip up or sin, we remember that God is God, and we are not. We confess and repent, or return to God, and try again. And that relationship gets a tiny bit stronger.

Isn’t this why we hear the Ten Commandments in Lent? These laws and this season are vessels for reflection and repentance, or discipline and training. They are both gifts from God: gifts for the sake of restoring us to ourselves, to right relationship, and to the God who loves us already. They are labors of love that, as the psalmist says, revive the soul, rejoice the heart, and give light to the eyes.

Thanks be to God!