

The Rev. Jake Miles Joseph

Lection: Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20

“How to Catch a Mouse”

October 8, 2017 at Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ—Fort Collins, CO.

Good morning Plymouth! Thank you this morning to our many volunteers who make worship possible: Sound, Deacons, Choir/ Music, and our wonderful liturgists. While the minister preaches, these volunteers have the job of invoking the Holy Spirit through their work.

Now, would you pray with me? O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be good and pleasing to you, our guide, our teacher, and the ultimate mouse-catcher! Amen.

Plymouth, I have something to confess to you as my employer this morning. Since I started working for this church as one of your ministers (three years ago November 1st), I have been hearing voices. Now, I know that sounds really bad coming from your minister. So, don't get the wrong idea. I am not hearing God (at least not audibly), angels, or ghosts—this is the month leading into Halloween so one must be very careful about invoking such things. **No, no...I am hearing voices because the way the minister offices area over here is insulated and the way the hallways are shaped and surfaced.** Because of the architecture of this church, I can hear voices emanating from the conference room if the door is open, as far away as the front door and even the back of the sanctuary from sitting my desk answering emails (which as Ron and Jane Anne will tell you is a significant part of working here—you all LOVE emails). Yes, Plymouth, if you are in this building, it is likely that your ministers can and do hear you. We hear all voices emanating from the walls and corridors.

So I hear lots of voices from my office, and usually I politely ignore them unless addressed to me. A week ago, however, though I heard a voice down the hallway asking a rather odd question: **Do you often have mice here at Plymouth?** Never having seen a mouse at Plymouth, although the previous associate minister Sharon Benton did warn me about their existence, I ran out of my office to find both the mouse in question and my interim boss, The Rev. Ron Patterson, in a staring contest in a corner down the hallway. The mouse looked at Ron. Ron looked at the mouse. I looked at the mouse. Ron and the mouse looked back at me. What should we do? I have never had to catch a mouse before.

Now mind you, this was a very small and incredibly adorable and reasonably terrified little baby mouse. It was about the size of your thumb from its head to end of its tale. Cowering in the corner, not running fast, Ron suggested it was probably dehydrated and lost.

Friends, let me say the other time I have seen that look of fear and confusion on someone's face is almost every Sunday when a new visitor arrives and doesn't know

anyone. So from now on when I do trainings about how to welcome people to church— just remember how scary a new church can be for human and mouse visitors alike.

By the time I had finished zoning out and turning that last metaphor about first time visitors over in my head, Ron had created an actual plan. “Get a cup and a piece of paper,” Ron said, so I went running for a small clear glass cup and a piece of sturdy paper. I also grabbed a small manila folder for me to use as a temporary wall to assist the effort from the corralling side of things.

Then we were off! As Barb and Daisy barricaded themselves in the front office, Ron chased the mouse with the cup as it took off down the hallway. I herded the mouse with the folder into another corner where Ron promptly dropped a glass over the mouse. [Produce an actual glass cup like the one we used and drop it down on the pulpit.] We had caught it! He then gently slid a piece of paper under the mouse to create a floor. Voila- we now had a mouse airplane! Imagine that mouse’s surprise as Ron lifted the mouse in the cup off the ground went swiftly out the door into the rain and safely deposited it by the far fence across the parking lot. The mouse had reached freedom and a state of liberation! And that, my friends, is how you catch a real, live, church mouse with a lot of care and teamwork.

Today’s lectionary reading from Exodus, Chapter 20 is one of the passages in the Bible (and there are several) that deal with the Ten Commandments or what academics call the Decalogue. No, there isn’t a commandment telling us step-by-step how to catch a mouse (I wish there were), but often we feel like a lost mouse when we encounter these ancient texts and rules and try to navigate the complex passages of Scripture and our lives in community. The Ten Commandments are, in their basic form, the outline of community covenant that ideally would help us to navigate lives in which we often feel like lost mice. A lot of life is, after all, feeling like a lost mouse in God’s universe.

This part of Exodus is a very ancient part of the Hebrew Bible. It is also a complex part (the scholarship surrounding Exodus from historians and accredited Biblical scholars is often rejected by our Evangelical sisters and brothers) because at closer look we can see the complexities of the text. The story of Moses bringing them down off of the mountains is important but so is the historical-critical scholarship. In the UCC, we take both the history and the narrative seriously.

Exodus, and this version of the 10 Commandments in particular, incorporates and directly quotes very VERY ancient portions of a pre-Biblical fragments called the Code of Hammurapi from the Ancient Near Eastern Babylonian context that predates the rest of Exodus by several hundred to a thousand years **and also** a 1,000 years after the original version it incorporated later edits and revisions from the later Priestly period. The Ten Commandments, contrary to an anachronistic literal interpretation of the story, represent around 2,000 years of human history, covenant, legal code, and the necessary changes there within. [Bible is most powerful when understood as communities wrestling with God.]

In non-academic talk, Exodus is an ancient narrative that draws upon much earlier legal codes (pre-dating the Bible) and like all relevant and good law was revised and edited much later to meet the needs of the Priestly era communities. This shows that the Ten Commandments were like all good and practical laws and good understanding of cultural covenants meant to be contextual, updated, and relevant for the society they governed. The Ten Commandments were written based on older laws and the version we know today, scholarship shows comes from a redacted version from a later period. So what happened to this ancient understanding of law and Bible as something that needs to be reinterpreted anew in the contexts it meets? Where did that go? When did we get stuck in that mousetrap of interpretive death? When did we, as a country, then start using bad interpretation of Biblical law (seeing it as frozen in time) to interpret our Constitutional Law? Which is the cat and which is the mouse here in this interpretive choice?

Vs. 4, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the sea...” For the word of God in Scripture, for the word of God among us... for the word of God within us... friends... what have we done with the Ten Commandments in modern America?

Politicians have turned them into an impractical, meaningless idol—a totem replacement for God’s good and dynamic presence. “If only we keep the old sculpture of the Ten Commandments in courtrooms,” says many rightwing politicians, “then we will surely have favor with God.” Even better, as long as we defend stone monuments to God, we don’t have to think about love of neighbor or what the monuments actually say or funding programs that support God’s people! Ironically, this is the definition of an idol (written on the very stone monuments they are defending to avoid)... a static representation of the will of God that ignores the realities of the needs and issues of the time. It denies a living God whose presence we experience and know and replaces God with stone scriptures of laws that were always meant to be reinterpreted for every new generation since they were taken from the Babylonians for the early drafts of the Talmud and revised by the Priestly governors. As a country, we have done the same thing, applied the same flawed written in stone logic with the Second Amendment—BUT we need to understand it for a new time and new issues and new technologies that were not here at the writing. **The weapons and violence we saw this week means that we need to re-understand again the meaning of both Biblical and Constitutional law.**

This modern, anachronistic worship of the Ten Commandment—changing the commandments from living/ dynamic/ covenant relationship into a sculpture to be fought over is idolatrous. It is “Conservative” Blasphemy. Currying favor with political base, stoking hatred against minorities, ignoring starvation and housing issues, missing the point of God’s love but...BUT coming to the defense of a statue with old laws written on it instead of the defense of those in need, the poor, the abused, the LGBTQ minorities around the world, the desperate... is blasphemy and misses the point of the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments were created from a process of meeting the covenant needs of the communities that wrote and reexamined them and made them a useful covenant in society.

I believe the mouse's journey represents the different ways that we get stuck in our faith journeys and our relationship to church, to Scripture, and to law in general. Here are the three stages of catching a mouse as shorthand for how we move from fear and entrapment to freedom and Grace through covenants both with God and society:

1. First the mouse was lost, terrified, thirsty, and hiding in a corner. When we try to interpret the Ten Commandments from a place of fear and solitude we end up living in a state of fear of God and each other—a fear that compounds itself. Scripture is meant to be read in community and reinterpreted for new times as God's Spirit moves. We need other mice! If we live in isolation from one another, we end-up trapped and lost like the mouse not knowing where to go next. That social isolation is how people end-up hold-up and alone in their homes trembling and collecting weapons. This is the mouse without community.

2. Second, the mouse was trapped under a glass cup. If we land in certain church communities or ideologies, the word of God can be used as a tool of confinement, of permanent entrapment, and a cast in stone understanding of a dynamic God. The cup might be made of glass but make no mistake, for it is confining. If we are like the mouse when it was trapped under the cup, we can see out and the wider world, but the walls of old understandings and confines keep us from growing or becoming. This happens when we take things literally without interpretation or context—we are trapped in glass houses of our making. This is the phase that turns Commandments into stone idols. Staying in the cup is safe, but it is not whole or good.

3. Third, the mouse was free! When we realize that law, Scripture, God, and Commandments are valuable and are best understood as process and as a journey together with the world... it is scary... we no longer have the safety of the glass church to save us and their rules... we no longer have the convenience of solitude and faith outside of community... but the payoff of a reading of the commandments and understanding covenant as something that can change is freedom. This is the mouse in covenant and freedom.

Fear, Entrapment, Freedom—the different ways to relate to life, community, covenant, and the difficult parts of Scripture and relationships are all choices we make as people and society. We can run away from community, we can become too comfortable in clearly defined houses and rules, or we can join the world and **learn** to be free. The arc of the Biblical Narrative and the Life of Christ shows the way towards liberation, but first we have to let go of stone carvings of ancient laws and learn how to love freedom once again.

And that, my friends, is how you catch... and release a mouse.
Amen.