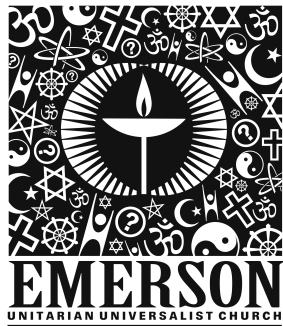


# **The Commandment Series**

**A Series of Sermons on The Ten Commandments**

**by The Reverend Anne Felton Hines**



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# The Commandment Series

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# **The First Commandment: No Other Gods Before Me**

*October 26, 2008*

*The Reverend Anne Felton Hines*

From the fifth book of the Torah, the Book of Deuteronomy: “Moses called all Israel together and said to them, ‘Listen, Israel, to the laws and customs that I proclaim to you today....Yahweh our God made a covenant with us....not with our ancestors, but with us, with all of us alive here today. On the mountain, from the heart of the fire, Yahweh spoke to you face to face....”

Over the past few years, the laws of which Moses spoke – what we know as the Ten Commandments – have become quite a matter of controversy, as fundamentalist Christians have tried to have them displayed on various government properties. In some cases they have won their court battles, and in other cases they have lost. (Guess which side of the battle I usually come down on? J)

Unfortunately, I think these controversies have resulted in Unitarian Universalists – and probably even many progressive Christians and Jews – losing sight of any good that might be contained in these laws that have guided both Judaism and Christianity for so many centuries. So I’ve decided to embark on a ten-part series to explore what meaning, if any, each of these Commandments have for us today. It won’t be a continuous series, as there are too many other sermon topics that need addressing at particular times of the church year. But I will try to get through all ten by the end of June or July.

To understand the importance of what is often called the “Laws of Moses,” we need to remember the story that led up to them – as told in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy (as well as the movie with Charlton Heston!). As you know, the Israelites had been slaves for generations in Egypt. And Moses – by birth not Egyptian, but raised by the Egyptian king’s daughter – had fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian who he’d seen hitting one of the slaves.

While in exile, Moses married and became a shepherd; he was happy in this peaceful existence. But one day, God appeared to him as a burning bush, and persuaded Moses to return to Egypt and lead his people, the Israelites, to freedom. Once back in Egypt, Moses went to Pharaoh and pleaded for him to let the Israelites leave in peace.

But Pharaoh was a stubborn man, and he kept refusing – even as God sent plague after plague – water that turned to blood, frogs, horseflies, boils, locusts, etc.; it became pretty disgusting. The story tells us that God finally sent the worst plague of all: the death of all the first-born in Egypt – “passing over” the first-born of the Israelites. And on the night of all those deaths, the Israelites gathered up what they could, and left their homes for the land promised to them by God. It is this event that is re-told by Jews every year at Passover.

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According to the Bible, it was about three months after leaving Egypt that the Israelites arrived at the base of Mount Sinai – “perhaps the most important place mentioned in the first five books” of the Bible, according to author Bruce Feiler. But despite its importance, no one seems to agree which mountain is actually Mt. Sinai! Biblical scholars and scientists have suggested twenty-two different possibilities, “from Egypt to the Sinai, from Israel to Saudi Arabia.”

Feiler tells of one legend that says the mountains of the world were all arguing with each other as to whom should host God. Each bragged of its greatness, except for Mt. Sinai, which said, “I am low.” So, says the legend, God chose Sinai because of its modesty – though the mountain is apparently only half the height of the Colorado Rockies, so perhaps that’s all it meant by claiming it was “low!”

At any rate, it is located in the Sinai desert, and when Feiler climbed to the top of it, he discovered the crater of an extinct volcano – which might explain why the Bible describes it as covered in clouds and shaking violently!

The story tells us that God calls to Moses out of the clouds, and instructs him to climb to the top of the mountain, where He presents Moses with stone tablets on which are written the first ten laws – or commandments – which the Israelites are to follow.

Peter J. Gomes, minister of Harvard’s Memorial Church, writes that “Before delivery of the Commandments, the people are a rowdy assortment of individuals with private and personal agenda; after the law, they become the ‘people of God.’”

Indeed, after returning to the people, Moses builds an altar, sacrifices burnt offerings, and sprinkles the blood of an ox on both the altar and the people, saying that this is the blood of the covenant between them and God. Writes Walter Wangerin, Jr.: “It was a sign that God and the children of Israel were now bound by a Covenant. God was their God; and they were God’s people.”

And it was the very first of these Commandments that established that relationship clearly: “I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you lived as slaves. You shall have no other gods to rival me.”

Why would God need to make such a demand? Because the story occurs at a time when the worship of numerous gods and goddesses was the norm. My friend Rev. Jim Nelson at Neighborhood Church in Pasadena points out that at that time, the “world was imbued with power and mystery, and the gods represented that. The Hebrews brought something new: a god concerned with morality.”

But this new God understood the ease with which we humans can abandon our god. You may recall that when Moses first returns with the tablets of stone, he finds that the people – led by his brother Aaron, of all people! – have grown so restless and distrusting that they have built a golden calf, which they are now bowing down to in worship. Moses becomes so enraged at this that he throws the tablets on the ground, causing them to shatter, and he has to return to the mountaintop to get a second edition.

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Humans are fickle, and need reminding why our god deserves our loyalty. “I brought you out of Egypt where you lived as slaves,” Yahweh reminds them.

German theologian Paul Tillich defined faith as reflective of that which is of “ultimate concern” to us. What does our life reflect? he asked. This is our god – “the one before which we have no other.” Says Rev. Nelson, “The first Commandment has to do with ultimacy, with what lays claim to our lives. It is,” he contends, “about obedience.”

So what is it you give your “obedience” to? Or perhaps your “allegiance?” What is your God?

Our country is in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression – though not yet as bad as that was. And of course, there is much finger-pointing going on, with many people deserving of blame. But what seems clear is that at least part of the blame rests with the banks and mortgage lenders who preyed on the vulnerabilities of Americans longing to own their own home, but unable to afford it. Seeing an opportunity to make huge amounts of money, these lenders offered so-called “sub-prime” loans to people who normally would not have qualified. And not surprisingly, at some point – usually because of sudden increased interest rates – the home owners were unable to pay their mortgage, and homes went into foreclosure. It is a story of tragic human consequences.

And it is clear to me that the people who gave out these loans, knowing fully the high risk they were taking, did so not out of any altruistic desire to help lower income people own their own homes, but merely out of a desire to make more money. Whatever religious faith these men and women might espouse, the god they were now worshiping was the god of Greed.

Our own Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that “A person will worship something; have no doubt about that....That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives and character. Therefore,” he said, “it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

Before I entered Seminary, I worked for five years at the Alcoholism Council of Greater Los Angeles – a referral and information center for alcohol and drug addiction. Most of the staff – both paid and volunteer – were recovering alcoholics. I became well acquainted with courageous stories of people rising up from the depths of alcoholic despair, placing their faith in a Higher Power – and a 12-step program – that could move them from the “slavery” of addiction to the liberation of sobriety.

So it always felt doubly tragic to counsel addicts who, no matter how hard they tried, continued to turn away from a god of love and hope, and to remain enslaved to the god of drugs.

Indeed, I have witnessed this within my own family – having an older brother who almost died from alcohol and drug addiction, but who has been “clean and sober” for over 25 years; and having a cousin who was never able to turn away from alcohol for long, and finally lost his family and his life from it. For both men, alcohol was their god from early in their lives; as one says in Alcoholics Anonymous, they were “powerless over” the drug. But only one

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was able to finally abandon that destructive god, and put his faith – his loyalty – in a god that would lead him to life.

The first Commandment given to the ancient Israelites established monotheism – a rejection of the worship of many gods, and the acceptance of only one. This became the god of Christianity, and later of Islam.

But I think what's more important in that Commandment isn't the monotheism, but the admonition to know who or what our god is, and to remain loyal to that god. Moses said to his people, "You must love...your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength."

We all have something that is of "ultimate concern" to us – to which we give our loyalty, with all our heart and soul and strength, and which represents true freedom to us. What is that for you?

Is it the god of ego? Of power? Of money and property? Or is it the god of compassion? Of mercy? Of unity and family?

And what would it take for you to abandon your god or gods – to slide into worshipping something else?

It has been said, with a chuckle, that if God had been a Unitarian Universalist, Moses would have been given a list of "Ten Suggestions" instead of Commandments! And indeed, I always say that our Unitarian Universalist Principles are "guides" for how we ought to live our lives, as opposed to a Creed.

But in fact, our seven Principles don't begin with the words, "We suggest an affirmation and promotion of the worth and dignity of every person," etc. Rather, they state unequivocally that "We affirm and promote"...worth and dignity, justice and compassion, encouragement of spiritual growth, the search for truth and meaning, the right of conscience, world community, and the interdependent web of all existence. These Principles are what we, as a religious community, hold as our "ultimate concern." They are what we attempt, as best we can, to give our loyalty and obedience to. And we do this because we know them to be liberating – for our lives, and for the lives of others.

And yet, it is not always easy to remain loyal to these Principles of our faith. I wrestle with them when I am tempted to speak ill of another person; and often I fall short.

I wrestle with them when I want to spend money for something I suspect has been made with slave labor; and often I fall short.

I wrestle with them when I seek the balance that brings spiritual deepening in the midst of a chaotic life; and often I fall short.

The God of the Israelites made a Covenant with His people, and created of them a community, so that they would not have to struggle to understand their God, or to live God's laws, alone.

We, too, need not struggle alone. We have our community of faith – this church – where we can explore together who or what our god is; to whom or what we give our loyalty.

And we have this church – this wonderful group of fellow seekers – to which we can turn for wisdom, for strength and for courage as we seek to live

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lives of integrity and trust – always knowing that we are embraced by the Holy Spirit of Love.

Had I been in charge, I would have added one more Commandment: You Shall Always be Grateful. May we never cease to give thanks for this life we have been granted. And may we live it with Love.

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## The Second Commandment: No Graven Images

*November 16, 2008*

*The Reverend Anne Felton Hines*

I know exactly when my obsession with shoes began. It was the day before my father's memorial service 7-1/2 years ago. My two sisters and I were taking our mother shopping for an outfit to wear to it, as well as some nice shoes. As we waited in the shoe department at Macy's for the sales clerk to help, I began looking at the racks of shoes on sale, and was caught by this pair that had only a clear plastic band across the toes. (Hold them up.) I will not tell you here what I call these shoes; suffice it to say that does not describe the image you would want of your minister!

Now, I had always wanted clear plastic shoes, because they were the closest thing I could get to Cinderella's "glass slippers." But this was the first time I'd seen any actually for sale. And while they cost more than – even discounted – I'd ever spent on shoes, these on display just happened to be in my size!

So taking that as a sign, I slipped them on and walked over to where my mother and sisters were sitting. "What d'ya think of these?" I asked, pointing to my feet.

My younger sister, Judith, exclaimed, "Oh they're darling! You should definitely buy them!"

"But where in the world would I wear them?" I asked.

"You could wear them to Dad's memorial service!" she said. Our older sister – who tends to be a bit more level-headed than either Judith or I in these matters – looked doubtful. But Judith persisted. "Dad would love them," she insisted.

I turned to Mom; "What do you think?" I asked. "Why, I think your father would like them very much," she said.

So I bought the shoes, and wore them to the memorial service the next day. When my younger brother saw them, he said rather sarcastically, "Well, those are sure appropriate for a memorial service!"

"Dad would've loved them," I replied. And it was downhill from there. My next shoe purchase was only slightly more appropriate for Sunday worship – so of course, I'm wearing them today!

But you did not come to hear about my shoe fetish. If you read what this morning's service was going to be about, you are expecting to hear about the second Commandment handed down to the Israelites from God, by way of Moses: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them, or serve them."

A couple of weeks ago, we recalled how Moses led the Israelites out of slavery, to seek a land and a life that was promised to them by their God,

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Yahweh. After wandering across the desert for about three months, Moses climbed Mt. Sinai to meet with Yahweh and receive the first ten laws – or Ten Commandments – that were the sign of a Covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites.

But Moses was gone a long time, and the people grew tired of waiting. They began wondering if something had happened to him, or even if he'd just decided to skip out on them – take another route down the mountain and return to the nice life he'd made for himself before freeing his people.

To relieve their anxiety, the Israelites gathered up all their treasures that they had brought with them out of Egypt, and built themselves a golden calf – a new god that they could see and touch, a god they could worship.

Now, worshiping idols wasn't new to the Israelites. According to William Propp, writing for the Oxford Companion to the Bible, the Egyptians, Canaanites and Mesopotamians believed that a god's spirit inhabited a statue after it was consecrated, thereby causing the statue to move, speak, even sweat. The purpose of an idol, says Dr. Propp, was to allow the human being a vision of the Divine, and to help that person and their God focus attention on one another.

But Judaism broke with that practice when it adopted the second Commandment prohibiting “representation” of Yahweh, or any other gods, “in physical form.” Douglas A. Knight – also writing in the Oxford Companion – tells us that “the strict prohibition of idols is one of the most distinctive features of the Israelite religion.”

Knight also acknowledges that the line between idolatry and “permissible cultic objects may seem unclear.” He gives as an example the ark that the people built according to God's orders, and which they kept in their sight on their journey. “The ark was considered not an idol,” says Knight, “but a manifestation of God's actual presence.” The “criterion for the illicit use” of an object “lay in whether it was worshipped as a ... substitute for Yahweh.”

And that's where my shoes come in.

Was the Israelites' “graven image” of God in the form of their golden calf any different from some of the “graven images” or idols we conjure up today – like my shoes? The people had become overcome with fear, with a sense of aimlessness while wandering in the desert. Being mere humans, they were easily distracted from their vision of freedom, of a new purpose in life, of love and compassion for themselves. And so they created something more immediate to worship. They found a substitute for God. Is that not what many of our behaviors and things become for us – substitutes for our understanding of the Divine?

Dr. Leonard Felder, a psychologist in West Los Angeles, has written a book called *The Ten Challenges*, in which he likens the second Commandment to “Breaking free of unfulfilling paths and habits.” He suggests that “the more fast-paced life becomes, the more our souls long for a chance to step back and gain a clearer perspective on what really matters.” But at the same time, we “get distracted or trapped by addictions and seductive habits... that eventually leave us burned out and dissatisfied.”

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When I began wearing shoes that were more than the ordinary black, beige or white shoes, I began getting a certain kind of notice. People would bring me little gifts, like the plaque that says, “If the shoe fits, buy one in every color;” and cards with colorful shoes on them and the words, “All I want is peace on earth and really cute shoes!” And when I wear a pair of new shoes to church, they are almost always noticed – which means that I’m getting noticed! And somehow, that translates into worthiness.

But my shoes have absolutely nothing to do with whether I’m a good preacher or not; or whether I’m a loving pastor for you when you’re in need; or whether you can trust me to be honest. They do not make me a good minister. And they surely have nothing to do with whether I’m living my life with integrity – whether my relationship with God – with my “higher power” – is intact. Indeed, by idolizing shoes, I turn them into a substitute for God; I become distracted from that relationship and from my ideals, following instead a path that is ultimately a dead end.

I suspect we all have material things, addictions and/or habits that we’ve allow to become idols; shoes is not my only one! But some idols are far more dangerous than others, severely limiting our ability to make decisions in our best interest, and cutting us off from whatever it is we might call God.

This Tuesday, Nov. 18th, is the 30-year anniversary of the tragedy of Jonestown – a perfect example of idolatry allowing the clouding of people’s inner wisdom. Seeking to build a more peaceful and just world, the followers of Jim Jones were tricked by his charisma and his paranoia. Instead of worshipping their ideals, they worshipped this mere human being, taking on his dark visions and his sickness, believing finally that their only way out was mass suicide. It was the very thing that the second Commandment was warning against, and it had tragic consequences.

Far less demonic, but still, I believe, a form of idolatry, is the allegiance demanded by people promising spiritual or psychological enlightenment, if followers will only put their entire trust – and often quite a bit of their money – into that one person or program. We witness this in the fundamentalist preachers on television – or “televangelists.” Many so-called “mega-churches” are built around the preacher, rather than the community or even the overall ministry.

And in the ‘70s and ‘80s, a number of Unitarian Universalists – perhaps some of you here – joined “new age” movements like est – later re-named The Forum – or the Course in Miracles, etc. – which seemed to encourage worship of one person, or one book, with new language understood only by participants, and a belief that this way was the only way to enlightenment.

Participants became missionaries for the program, and I often felt as trapped by them as I did by born-again Christians trying to save my soul. It was very uncomfortable.

And now, since the election, I’ve wondered if those who oppose same-sex marriage, based on their religious beliefs, are practicing a form of idolatry when they focus all their attention on a few passages in the Old Testament, to

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the negation of the teachings of Jesus? Nowhere in the Gospels – which are the only places in the Bible where Jesus speaks – does he mention anything about homosexuality. Rather, the great teacher of Nazareth models inclusivity, by accepting everyone into his circle of friends – no matter how they were viewed by society. He loved them all.

So here today we have children around the world dying from war, famine, disease, and other tragedies. But in America we have people who – claiming God as their guide – are obsessed with a few words written centuries ago, that supposedly tell them to oppress a group of God’s children because of their sexual orientation. Is that not “bowing down” to idols?

Chris Hedges, in his book, *Losing Moses on the Freeway*, contends that, “We depend on our idols to give us order and meaning; to define our place in the world. They free us from moral choice,” he says; “determine right and wrong. Render judgment. We follow. We conform.”

In our response to those opposed to marriage equality, we must be careful not to succumb to the idol of self-righteousness or fear, and instead lead from a place of love.

The second Commandment recognizes the human longing for a relationship with something greater than ourselves – whether that be a God, or Nature, or our ideals; something that gives our life meaning. At the same time, it recognizes the human tendency to give up when the path to such meaning grows difficult. Dr. Rowland Shepard, professor of clinical Psychology at Kenyon College in Ohio, suggests that “the Ten Commandments...should be called the ten hardest things we try to do in life....The topics,” he says, “aren’t ancient history; they are the core issues most of us struggle with in our personal lives.”

What are the “core issues” with which you are struggling? What keeps you from claiming your spiritual practice, from staying on your spiritual path? What behaviors or things have you allowed to become “graven images” of the Divine? And can you imagine the freedom, the joy, the blessing you would experience if you could let them go, and turn your gaze toward the Holy?

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I close with this poem by the Reverend Barbara Pescan; it is called  
“Blessing.”

We spend so much time running from ourselves  
fleeing from what we know  
about the goodness in our hearts;  
we think we can escape the intelligence of our loving.  
Imagine you are standing before a bodhisattva –  
Jesus, Buddha, the first mother;  
It does not matter what you call the holy one –  
...Shining from their faces is the beam of  
All their questions, the compassion of their living.  
Can you see yourself through those eyes?  
Can we know each other like this?...  
Can we know ourselves seen  
and know each other this same way  
until our restless hearts learn to abide  
in this knowing and this love?  
Can we live in this gaze of blessing?

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## The Third Commandment: Taking the Name of God in Vain A Commandment on Truth-Telling

*March 15, 2009*

*The Reverend Anne Felton Hines*

A few months ago I embarked on a ten-part series to explore what meaning, if any, each of the Ten Commandments might have for us today. I did this because I have felt that most Unitarian Universalists – and probably even many progressive Christians and Jews – have lost sight of any good that might be contained in those “Laws of Moses” that have guided both Judaism and Christianity for so many centuries.

Back in October, we explored the first Commandment: “You shall have no other Gods before me,” and the importance of discerning and remaining faithful to our most cherished values in life.

In November we learned about the second Commandment, “You shall have no graven images,” and the human tendency to make idols of people and things that undermine our spiritual integrity.

Today, I want to explore with you the third Commandment: “Thou shall not take the name of God in vain.” (I have to share with you that somehow in the first draft of our Order of Service today, the word “vain” in the title was misspelled, and read “v-e-i-n” instead – which gave a whole new meaning to the commandment!)

I, like probably most of you, grew up with the assumption that to “take God’s name in vain” meant using his name as a curse – such as in “God damn it!” Leaving the name of God out of the curse didn’t get us off the hook, since the only Being who could damn anyone or anything would be God! I even remember one Sunday School teacher claiming that to use the exclamation “Gosh darn it!” constituted a sin, since those words were simply euphemisms for the real things – and she was probably right!

But theologians both ancient and modern will tell us that the third Commandment is about much more than merely the use of God’s name when cursing or swearing. Rather, the third Commandment calls us to authentic and loving relationships – with ourselves, and with one another.

The psychotherapist and storyteller Sylvia Boorstein likes to ask her adult students to raise their hands if they’ve ever broken a bone, and a number of people usually respond with raised hands. Asked to keep their hands in the air if those broken bones still hurt, everyone lowers them.

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Then she asks them to raise their hands if they've experienced hurt feelings by something someone has said to them in the past year; many more hands go up for that than for the broken bones. She asks her students to keep their hands in the air if they still hurt from something said to them in the past five years; then ten years, twenty years, even thirty years. And still, most hands remain in the air.

Her point is that the old adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," is incorrect. The truth is that while "sticks and stones may break (our) bones," words can always hurt us; indeed, they can break our spirit – at least for a time.

It is why the Buddha included Right Speech as one point on his Eight-fold Path, says Boorstein. She points out that he could have been more "efficient" and simply included it under "Right Action," for surely speaking is an action. But he knew the power of words, and how what we say can either hurt or heal relationships.

In the Book of Leviticus in Jewish Scripture, there is the admonition, "Do not curse a deaf person." When trying to decipher this puzzling statement, rabbis concluded it means that our ability to speak was given to us as a precious gift, to be used for blessing and uplifting our lives, not for degrading ourselves or others. So even if someone can't hear our curses, the basic misuse of the gift of speech is wrong. I would imagine that would extend not only when speaking unkindly to someone who can't hear us, but also when speaking unkindly about someone who is not present – speaking behind their back.

Most of us here probably remember the period in the 1960s and '70s, when it became popular to join "encounter groups" and share everything that was on our minds, including our anger at others within the group. Even outside such groups, we felt that we had the right and the responsibility to unleash our anger towards friends and family alike, with whatever words felt most cathartic. And in the process, we now know, many feelings were hurt, and relationships were broken.

Today, rather than encounter groups, we have e-mail and other cyberspace playgrounds where we can express our anger at people, and not even have to stick around to see how we've affected them. We do it with sarcasm, and we do it with angry outbursts. And then we hit "send," shut off our computer and walk away.

It can be another form of cursing – a way in which we use the gift of speech to hurt, rather than to heal and connect. I think that if we had to put those words in a letter and snail-mail them, we'd have to take more time to think about the consequences of our words, and would end up not sending them. The danger of e-mail is the ease with which we can vent our anger, and with the press of a button, send it on its way. I know, because I have done it.

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And sometimes I have been able to repair the damage; but sometimes I have not.

The damage we do when using speech as a vehicle for our anger, is not only the hurt we cause to the other – often someone we care for dearly. We also do damage to ourselves, because rarely do we feel good after such outbursts.

The physician and Torah scholar, Maimonides, said over 800 years ago, “Cursing is prohibited not (only) because of what it does to the victim, but because of the effect on the individual who pronounces it.”

We can all remember times – many times, I am sure – when we have felt hurt by the angry words of another. But we can also remember those times when we have seen the effect our own angry words have had on another person, and it has not felt good.

So is the third Commandment suggesting that we never express our anger? That we lie instead, keeping our angry or hurting thoughts to ourselves?

No. In fact, according to many scholars, it suggests just the opposite.

Another way in which we “take the name of God in vain,” they contend, is through lying – to ourselves and to one another. It is about saying, in a variety of ways, “I swear to God” – promising something we cannot fulfill, or telling a lie to avoid consequences of the truth. And the question to always ask, I think, is why do we feel the need to make unreasonable promises, or why do we find it necessary to lie – especially in relationships that should be grounded in honesty?

Years ago, when my daughter and I were living in San Diego County – she in the city, and I in the northern end of the county – she asked me one day if she could borrow a dress of mine to wear to a party. Flattered that Tiffany would want to wear anything of mine, I ignored the discomfort I felt with her request, and quickly said yes.

The next day I drove to her house – a visit already planned so I could see the place she and her husband had just moved into. After spending about an hour with them, I began to get ready to leave. “Mom,” said Tiffany, “did you bring the dress?”

Well, I had completely forgotten, and now there was no time to go back home for it. I apologized profusely, and Tiffany said, “Oh, that’s OK; I can find something else to wear.”

I burst out laughing. “No, it’s not OK!” I said. “I bet you’re really thinking, ‘Damn! How could she have been so stupid?!’” Tiffany chuckled and admitted that yes, that was pretty much the words going through her mind! So we looked through her closet and indeed, she found something that would work just as well as my dress, and everything was truly OK.

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But what would have been so terrible about her acknowledging from the beginning her anger and frustration with me? And what would have been the problem with me telling her my concerns about lending her my dress in the first place? Would our relationship have been irreparably damaged? I doubt it. Indeed, it might have even been strengthened.

There are, of course, lies that have far more serious consequences than this example – the kinds of lies we witnessed during the Bush administration that cost the lives of thousands of people needlessly; or the lies of Wall Street and financial experts that have resulted in the loss of millions of dollars, jobs and dreams for innocent Americans. If you caught the brilliant interview Thursday night of financial analyst Jim Cramer, by comedian John Stewart, you know what I'm talking about.

Those kinds of lies demand an entirely separate sermon. For today, let's stick with the more personal lies we tell relatively easily in our everyday lives.

And here's where we see the two different interpretations of the third Commandment woven together. Do we not often lie to ourselves and to one another because we cannot figure out how to express our feelings – especially feelings of anger, disappointment, and frustration – in ways that aren't hurtful? Are we not sometimes afraid that the only words we will find to express ourselves will be words of spite and bitterness? Or that any expression of negativity towards another person will result in their anger at us – and that the relationship will be beyond repair? Is it not a lack of trust, ultimately, that is behind these lies?

But is it not also true, that every time we withhold the truth from another, we are creating a small – and sometimes quite large – crack in that relationship? Sylvia Boorstein contends that “We are obliged to tell the truth; it is the way we take care of one another.” Indeed, she goes on, the Buddha insisted that we must always be completely honest, but with the “extra instruction” that we tell the truth in a “timely” manner, and that our words be “gentle, kind and helpful.”

If we define “God” in the way that the theologian, Paul Tillich, did – as that which is of “ultimate concern,” then we see that the third Commandment is advising us to not treat that which we cherish with carelessness or disregard. If what we hold most dear is the dignity of every person, and our unity with all that is, then to use our speech either to tell lies or to harm another person, is a breaking of that Commandment. And we end up hurting our very soul.

The poet Adrienne Rich writes: “It isn't that to have an honorable relationship with you, I have to understand everything, or tell you everything at once. It means...that I feel strong enough to hear your tentative and groping words. That we both know we are trying, all the time, to extend the possibilities of truth between us. The possibility of life between us.”

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You will hear me say over and over how much I dislike anonymous complaints, or surveys that don't include names. I fully understand why people may not want to attach their names to their opinions, especially negative ones; but I do not believe such anonymity extends "the possibility of life" between people. And what in the world is the purpose of a faith community such as Emerson, if not to help us "extend" such possibility in human relationships?

The people who wrote the Book of Exodus, in which the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments is told, knew the tendency of we humans to use our words carelessly at times – to lash out in anger rather than with understanding; and to speak falsely at times rather than risk alienation. Perhaps they even knew how we are so afraid that we will not be loved; sometimes we are even afraid we will not be able to love ourselves.

But I believe that we come to church seeking reassurance that we are indeed worthy of love. We come hoping to see in the reflection of those sitting next to us, that spark of the Divine that was in us from before we took our first breath, but that we can so easily lose sight of. And we come yearning to be that reflection for others as well – to be a blessing to others, as they are to us.

And that only happens when we dare to be true to ourselves, and true to one another. That is what relationship is all about. That is what community is about. "Extending the possibility of life between us," so that together, we may become "as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be."

So may it be.

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## The Fourth Commandment: Keeping the Sabbath

May 31, 2009

*The Reverend Anne Felton Hines*

I had a conversation with my younger sister yesterday – the one who had a bout of diverticulitis just two weeks before my first bout of it back in March. As we talked, we both admitted that on those rare days when we have no pressing demands at work or at home – no meetings, no appointments, no looming deadlines – we often feel at a loss as to what to do with our time! My sister is a community college professor, and when classes are finally over, and all the grades submitted, she tends to feel some anxiety, and even dread; and I knew exactly what she meant!

I always look forward to my vacations with great anticipation of all the free time I'll have to just do nothing – or to do the somethings I never take time to do the rest of the year! And yet it is probably no coincidence that inevitably, on those first couple of days of my time off, I will still be tending to unfinished business; I may even be shut inside my office here, taking care of last-minute details. And now I wonder...Is it just too unsettling to wake up that first morning of vacation with no demands on me other than to “be still, look up and listen,” as our choir’s anthem suggests?

I don't suppose that God experienced such discomfort on His first day of vacation. In the Book of Genesis, we are told that it took six days for God to create “heaven and earth...with all their array.” And then, according to the story, God “blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on that day he rested after all his work of creating.” He didn't look around for something else to do; He didn't feel guilty for not doing more; God simply rested.

And so it is that the fourth Commandment handed down to the Israelites when Moses met Yahweh atop Mt. Sinai, was that they should “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Indeed, this was considered an important enough mandate that it takes up a third of the entire text of the Decalogue. . Whereas most of the Commandments that follow are one-liners – “Honor thy father and mother; thou shalt not kill,” etc., the 4th Commandment is quite detailed: “For six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath for Yahweh your God. You shall do no work that day, neither you nor your son nor your daughter nor your servants, men or women, nor your animals nor the stranger living with you. For in six days Yahweh made the heavens, earth and sea and all that these contain, but on the seventh day He rested; that is why Yahweh has blessed the Sabbath day and made it sacred.”

“Made it sacred;” wow! How many of us can say we make one day a week, “sacred?” I suspect not many. Indeed, we don't even let children have a Sabbath day any longer, as they work on school projects, study for exams, and run from one extracurricular activity to another. We are a culture of

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“doers,” which wouldn’t be bad if we took seriously the admonition to “rest” when our work is done – or even when it remains undone.

I think that many of us believe deep down, that setting aside time for personal rest and renewal – especially an entire day! – is self-indulgent and irresponsible. Even when we do take vacation time, we’re never far from our computers and e-mail access. Heaven forbid that we should look un-productive or selfish!

But educator Parker Palmer insists that “self-care is never selfish; it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have – the gift I was put on earth to offer others.” With this in mind, you would think that ministers would be the best at keeping the Sabbath holy, for how else can we minister to others if we don’t take care of ourselves? And yet, at almost every single ministers’ conference I attend, there’s some workshop or conversation about “self-care,” because we clergy just don’t seem to “get it!”

Perhaps I’ve shared with you before about the one minister who seemed to truly know about self-care as a necessary part of her ministry. I met her while I was still in Seminary, but she was serving a church here in Southern California. She told some of us that she made sure to get a massage several times a week; it was what kept her centered and sane. One day, as she was walking out of her massage therapist’s office, she encountered a member of her congregation. The congregant said, “Why, Reverend, I didn’t know today was your day off!” My friend replied, “It isn’t; and if you ever see me doing this on my day off, I want you to report it to the Board, because this is part of my job!” She knew the part self-care played in her ministry to her congregation.

But shouldn’t self-care – a time for rest and renewal – be part of everyone’s job? Like having recess in elementary school – a chance to let go of the tasks for a little while, so that we can return with freshness and new energy?

I suspect the reason the fourth Commandment was one of the first in the list, is that without the ability to let go of our busyness for a time, we cannot develop the strength and wisdom needed to honor the remaining six Commandments.

For honoring the Sabbath is about more than merely resting. A 19th century rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, taught that the root letters of “Shabbat” (or “Sabbath”) have two meanings. The first is to “cease from activity that is in progress;” but the second meaning is to “put everything in proper perspective.” God worked diligently for six straight days, accomplishing a different task each day; but when he rested on the seventh, he was able to look at all that he’d created, and view it as a Whole. We need to be able to do that with our lives.

Indeed, according to the Mystical Kabbalistic teachings, the Hebrew letters in “Sabbath” are the same – in different order – as in the word “teshuva,” which means to turn oneself around. Sabbath, then, offers us the opportunity to turn away from that which may have become routine and unfulfilling, toward a path that offers a deeper, more enriching way of life.

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In his book, *Losing Moses on the Freeway*, Chris Hedges argues that the Sabbath isn't only about one day, but about setting aside time to "nurture all that...makes life worth living." It is about "honoring those we love and those who love us – honoring the essence of the divine" – of that which we cherish most deeply.

Which means it doesn't necessarily need to all happen on just one day – which is good news for those of us who find it difficult to devote an entire day each week to letting go of obligations – especially if we have children, or elderly parents for whom we're caring, or any number of other ongoing demands.

In reading the first chapter of Genesis, we find that at the end of each of those first six days, God looked at what he'd created and "saw that it was good." What if, as a beginning to honoring the Sabbath, we simply paused at the end of each day and looked at what it had been – our triumphs, our losses, what we felt good about and what we wished had gone differently – and said simply, "It has been good?" Perhaps some days we'd only be able to say, "It has been what it has been," but still we would be pausing, resting, and reflecting on our life. How many of us even do that?

Imagine the gift to our children if we taught them, before they drifted off to sleep, to pause for a moment and reflect on the day now ending? How might that change for them the meaning of their lives? How might that help them discern what is important, and what can be let go?

Taking some bit of time every day for "Sabbath" – for rest and reflection – feeds our spirit, and in so doing, offers us the vision and the strength to give ourselves more fully to our work, our families, ourselves, and the world.

According to Leonard Felder, Sabbath for traditional Jews "is the joyful envisioning of what the world will be like when the brokenness is repaired." The fourth Commandment, he suggests, "challenges us not only to find a way to unhook...from the treadmill of our lives, but also to connect with a deeper spiritual vision of how we want the world to be in the future. Then, in the days ahead, we get a chance to take the small steps toward that vision."

When we take time to rest from the routines of life – whether for an entire day or for 30 minutes each day, we may feel less overwhelmed by the demands of the world, and begin to feel more deeply our connection with all that is.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith has always called us to look beyond ourselves to those in need of our voice. Our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors have been a witness for justice and for peace, and they call to us still today to follow that path.

But we cannot be strong witnesses if we do not honor the sacredness of Sabbath time – whether one day a week, or thirty minutes each day. We cannot be present for others if we ignore our need for rest and communion with the Eternal – with the Holy Spirit of Life and of Love.

In just this past week, we have seen the basic human right of marriage denied, once again, to gay and lesbian couples, by a Court more concerned with placating a small majority than with their task of creating justice.

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Just this past week, we have learned that access to basic human needs such as food, shelter, and health care will be denied to the poorest in our State – while the rich continue to avoid taxes on their yachts.

And just this past week, our children and grandchildren have been told that their educational needs will be curtailed even more, unless they are among the affluent.

Our Unitarian Universalist Principles call us to confront these difficult issues – to speak up for justice, and to walk in solidarity with those most vulnerable.

But in order to do that, we must give care to ourselves as well, lest we become paralyzed by exhaustion. We must take seriously the Commandment given to us so many centuries ago: “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” – whether that Sabbath be one day of the week, or one segment of each day. It is sacred time. Take it. Open yourself to the gifts it offers you. Listen to its song.

“In the midst of the whirling day, ...in the frantic pace of life,” let us “pause, ...catch our breath, ...loosen our grip on life....” Let us be grateful that “we are in process,” and “that the world is still to be created.” May we rejoice and be glad.

Amen.

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## The Fifth Commandment: Honor Thy Father and Mother

*June 21, 2009*

*The Reverend Anne Felton Hines*

About ten years ago, while both my parents were still living, I was talking one day to my daughter – I don't remember the topic. All I remember is telling her that sometimes I worried that she and her brother talked about me behind my back, commiserating about how much I drove them nuts.

"Oh no, you don't have to worry about that, Mom," she assured me; "we just talk about you the way you and your siblings talk about Grandmommy and Granddaddy!"

Oh...My...God! That was the worst possible thing she could have said to me! My siblings and I used to say horrible things about our parents! We'd complain about Dad's angry outbursts, his inappropriate comments to our daughters, his unreasonableness, his hoarding of books and old magazines; it went on and on.

And while Mom probably received less of our anger, she got no more respect from us than Dad. We'd role our eyes when she'd say, "I remember the times..." and then tell a story we'd heard a zillion times before. We'd laugh about her naiveté, and her tendency to sound like Edith Bunker; and we'd complain about her passivity around Dad, or of her lack of passivity when she'd argue with him and make things worse. The poor woman couldn't win, no matter what she did.

My siblings and I spent so much time complaining about our parents, that I began wondering if we'd have anything to talk about when they finally passed away. I wondered if there was any basis for our relationships, other than commiserating about Mom and Dad.

I think that for me – and perhaps for my siblings as well, though I can't speak for them, truly practicing the 5th Commandment did not really take hold until after my parents were gone. My relationship with each of them was just too ambivalent before that time. (And mind you, I was in my 50s and 60s when they died, which is a long time to hang on to ambivalence!)

It has been said that the 5th Commandment – "Honor your father and mother" – is the most difficult of all of them. And not just of all the 10 commandments with which we're familiar, and on which I'm preaching this series. According to the Torah, the Israelites were given 613 commandments in all; and honoring our parents was still considered the most challenging!

One Biblical scholar, Rabbi Joseph Telushkim, points out what he calls the "peculiar fact that while the Bible legislates love of neighbor and of the stranger and of God...(it) demands (only) the standard of honor and respect" for our parents, because "that can remain in force even in times of estrangement." Though I'm not sure I'd agree that we continue to even honor

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our parents when we're feeling most separate from them; but clearly, the Torah calls us to do that, as difficult as it may be.

Apparently, the word "honor" even has a double meaning. In Hebrew, the word is "cahbeid," which can mean "heaviness, difficulty, or burden;" but it can also mean "honor, to give importance or weight to someone."

So Yahweh seemed to know what he was doing when he handed this commandment to Moses, along with the other nine in the initial group: He knew that while loving our parents could sometimes feel impossible at times, "honoring" them could feel like a heavy weight that never lifts.

Last Father's Day, I delivered a sermon here about my father, in which I talked about how difficult he could be, and how much anger I'd carried until the day he died – so much that I couldn't even bring myself to tell him as he lay dying that I loved him – an action that haunts me still with remorse.

I also shared with you in that sermon my father's many gifts that I'd finally come to appreciate, and the importance of being able to embrace our fathers in their totality – both their light and their shadows.

But probably what you've heard mostly from me about my mother over the years is all the good stuff: Her commitment to social justice and peace – how she taught us kids that to be a Christian meant standing up for the poor and the disenfranchised; how she co-founded the Orange County Interfaith Peace Ministry; and how at the age of 90, she would still gently argue with the other patients in the nursing home about why gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to marry. She is my model for compassion and courage, for social witness and advocacy.

But you wouldn't have known that by the way I talked to her sometimes. When I was a rebellious and impatient teenager, I would often respond to anything she said with, "Oh Mom, how can you say that?! That's ridiculous!" And when I was 60, I could be heard saying, "Oh Mom, how can you say that?" That's ridiculous!" I did not always honor her well.

But I imagine that most of you – and, if truth be told, probably all of you – have similar stories to tell. The parent/child relationship is the most complicated and hardest to untangle. Psychologist Jeanne Safer, in her book *Death Benefits*, contends that our "parents never leave us. After death they simply move their residence from our outer world to our inner world, and accompany us for the rest of our lives." It is what happened to them when their parents died, and it will happen to our children when we die.

And that's why that fifth Commandment to "honor" our parents is so important – when they're alive if possible, but if not, then especially after they've died. Because even in death, they are with us in just about everything we do.

Several years ago I saw a pillow that was embroidered with the words, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, I have become my mother after all!" If the store had had three of these pillows, I would have bought one for me and both my sisters! I cannot tell you how often I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, and see my mother (which is not surprising, because since I was a young woman, people have said I was the "spitting image" of her!). And every once

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in a while I'll say something, and realize it's exactly the way my mother used to say it.

It's equally true of my dad. The other night I was having dinner with my daughter and grandson, and as I began to give Josh a bit of advice, I had a sudden image of my father giving me similar advice when I was about Josh's age. And it made me smile.

But I don't always smile when I notice parts of my parents in myself. We inherit both their light and their shadow – both their gifts and their demons. And we can not honor them – or love them – if we do not acknowledge both.

In his book, *Losing Moses on the Highway*, Chris Hedges tells us that “to honor our parents is to honor our essence, the roots from which we sprung.”

“To honor our parents is to honor our essence...” That's why this Commandment is so important: We cannot fully honor ourselves if we cannot claim our parents as an integral part of ourselves – and then learn to separate, but not disown.

Jeanne Safer wrote her book after her mother died; her father had died a number of years earlier. She said that just as she had taken an inventory of all of her mother's belongings after her death, and determined what she wanted to keep and what to give away, at some point she began taking “inventory” of her mother's personality traits as well. What traits should she keep? What should she discard? And how should she “integrate those selections into her own, now separate, mental household?”

Of course, those traits had already become part of Dr. Safer's psyche. But “the relationship is just as real when it exists solely within our psyche,” she writes, “but then it belongs to us alone and is ours to alter. We can do more than merely return to what and where we were before our loss; we can now move forward.”

But my experience is that it's not always as easy a process as simply “taking an inventory” of our parents' traits, and deciding what we want to continue to incorporate into who we are, and what we want to “give away.” We need to first embark on the sometimes long and arduous road of compassion for our parents and forgiveness; because even the most perfect parent seems to engender something in their relationship with their child that needs pardoning.

The only way I know to move through our hurt or fear or anger into forgiveness, is to learn who our parents' were, and why. What were their stories? What shaped them? What made them who they were? What were their fears and sorrows, their triumphs and joys?

I read recently about a novel by Michael Dorris, titled *Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. The book is apparently actually three stories – each told by a member of the same family. The first is that of a 15-year-old girl describing how her seemingly unloving mother had abandoned her. The second section is told by her mother, describing the painful life she'd had. And the third is told by an aunt who had refused to help the teenage girl and her mother when they were in desperate need; and we learn of the incidences in her life that had made her who she was.

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What would it be like if someone wrote a story of our life, not only from our standpoint, but from the standpoint of our parents and their parents? What would we learn about them? And what would we learn about ourselves? Would that not lead us to deeper compassion for them? Would it not lead us to greater acceptance of ourselves?

Ever since my father died, I've wanted to write a book about him. At first I wanted to write it with my two sisters, each of us writing from our different – but similar – experiences of him. But now I'm more interested in having it be a compilation of all my siblings' memories of him, but only after we've learned more about his life before he was our father, from the perspective of those who knew him, and from what little he'd written about his life.

For several years I thought I wanted to write this book as a way of helping others gain insights into their fathers, and maybe even their mothers – much like the purpose of my Father's Day sermon last year.

But now I realize I need to write it for myself; whether it's ever published is relatively unimportant. I need to write it as a way to gain a deeper understanding of my father – unravel his complexities, organize the pieces of the puzzle of why he was the way he was. I'd hope the creation of his story would be an affirming experience for my siblings; but I know it would be for me.

In my sermon last year, I said that I'd always wished my father would join a 12-step program so he'd learn the Serenity Prayer; and then I acknowledged that it was I who needed the prayer. I needed to accept who he was, because nothing was going to change that.

Perhaps we all need to recite the Prayer as we struggle to fulfill what the fifth Commandment calls us to do: to honor our parents by letting go of our anger, our hurt, even our guilt, and accept them for who they are – or were. Because it is ultimately the only way we can finally accept ourselves. We are them.

Chris Hedges writes: "I am my father's son. This is my inheritance. I will not squander it."

May we not squander the gifts we have inherited from our parents – both their triumphs and their struggles. May we honor them by seeking to understand and accept who they are or were; and in so doing, may we come to a deeper understanding and acceptance of ourselves, and a compassion for all beings on our earth.

This is the gift we hand on to those who follow us. This is how we will honor them.

May it be so. Love is greater than fear; and that, in the words of that great Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker: "The arc of the Universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

I know that a lot of you have been feeling that same frustration and concern of which I spoke in that column; and I also know that you let out a sigh of relief when you gather with your friends here at Emerson – whether it be on a Sunday morning in worship, or in a Small Group Ministry, or even during some committee or Board meeting. You may not even realize it, but I

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suspect that during times like these, when our core Unitarian Universalist – and indeed, American – principles of freedom and compassion and reasoned dialogue seem drowned out by the louder voices of fear and injustice, some bit of tension leaves your body when you arrive here and know you have arrived at a place of safety; a place that can soothe your weary soul.

Think of all the people in our West Valley community who are in need of our message of freedom and compassion and reasoned dialogue; who long for a community of “open minds, loving hearts and welcoming hands;” who wonder how to talk to their children about the deeper issues of life, but do not know where to turn.

Perhaps you remember a time when you did not know where to turn. Perhaps you remember the relief you felt when you first learned that there was a religious community that shared your values; that would give you not answers to your spiritual questions, but an invitation to walk with others on a shared quest for truth.

A couple of weeks ago, about a dozen of us from Emerson met for an hour with Senator Dianne Feinstein’s top aide to talk about health care reform. After I spoke a bit about our denomination’s stand on universal health care, the young man – Mr. Daley – remarked on how “cool” it was that our church has a woman minister. Then he asked if I could explain in one sentence what Unitarian Universalists believe, because he knew nothing about us. We all chuckled; I said no, I couldn’t describe it in one sentence. But I proceeded to try to succinctly explain this complicated faith, with the help of others sitting around the table.

Mr. Daley clearly never imagined a religion such as ours; but what most impressed him, I think, was how supportive UUism has been of the rights of bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender people over the years, and how hard this particular church has worked for marriage equality. “Hmmm...” he said; “I think I have some friends who’d be interested in your church!” He also seemed pretty excited to learn that he could read my sermons on our website; so maybe we’ll even see him at Emerson one of these days!

But it did make me wonder: If this young man hadn’t been the one to meet with us that afternoon to talk about health care reform, how much longer might it have been before he’d learn about Unitarian Universalism – before he’d be introduced to this faith that was the first to ordain women, the first to ordain gays and lesbians, the first to support a woman’s right to choose abortion, the first to perform services of Holy Union – and to advocate for marriage for same-sex couples?

Why would we not be doing everything in our power to get our message of freedom, compassion and reasoned dialogue to Mr. Daley and others like him? Why would we not be inviting our friends, and our children’s friends, to some of the activities we enjoy here at Emerson – the hiking group, the concerts, the book group, family nights – and dare I say, even Sunday morning worship and Religious Education? Why do we Unitarian Universalists remain so hidden?

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Our message of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” is what first drew me into Unitarian Universalism, and it is what makes me such an evangelist for it today. It is why I am so passionate about growth – of UUism in general, and of our membership here at Emerson; I believe we have a message that can change lives – that can soothe tattered souls. I know not all of you like the idea of Emerson becoming larger; it can be unsettling. But it can also be incredibly enriching – not only to those of us here now, but to those whose lives we touch because we have reached out and welcomed them in.

There’s a wonderful song in our blue hymnbook that goes, “There’s a river flowin’ in my soul; there’s a river flowin’ in my soul; and it’s tellin’ me that I’m somebody; there’s a river flowin’ in my soul.” Let’s sing that together. (Sing song.) That’s what a religious community such as ours tells each person that walks through the doors – that they’re “somebody;” that they have been born with “worth and dignity” like every other human being, and that they are deserving of the same compassion and justice as every other human being. Imagine the difference that message can make in the lives of some people. Imagine the difference it has already made – even in your life.

As our new church year unfolds, let us move forward boldly and joyfully, being for one another and for those who seek us like a fountain of water that soothes the soul, and strengthens us to do the work we are called to do in the world.

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## **The Sixth Commandment: You Shall Not Kill**

*November 8, 2009*

*The Reverend Anne Felton Hines*

From the fifth book of the Torah, the Book of Deuteronomy: “Moses called all Israel together and said to them, ‘Listen, Israel, to the laws and customs that I proclaim to you today....Yahweh our God made a covenant with us....not with our ancestors, but with us, with all of us alive here today. On the mountain, from the heart of the fire, Yahweh spoke to you face to face....”

Over the past few years, the laws of which Moses spoke – what we know as the Ten Commandments – have become quite a matter of controversy, as fundamentalist Christians have tried to have them displayed on various government properties. In some cases they have won their court battles, and in other cases they have lost. (Guess which side of the battle I usually come down on? J)

Unfortunately, I think these controversies have resulted in Unitarian Universalists – and probably even many progressive Christians and Jews – losing sight of any good that might be contained in these laws that have guided both Judaism and Christianity for so many centuries. So I’ve decided to embark on a ten-part series to explore what meaning, if any, each of these Commandments have for us today. It won’t be a continuous series, as there are too many other sermon topics that need addressing at particular times of the church year. But I will try to get through all ten by the end of June or July.

To understand the importance of what is often called the “Laws of Moses,” we need to remember the story that led up to them – as told in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy (as well as the movie with Charlton Heston!). As you know, the Israelites had been slaves for generations in Egypt. And Moses – by birth not Egyptian, but raised by the Egyptian king’s daughter – had fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian who he’d seen hitting one of the slaves.

While in exile, Moses married and became a shepherd; he was happy in this peaceful existence. But one day, God appeared to him as a burning bush, and persuaded Moses to return to Egypt and lead his people, the Israelites, to freedom. Once back in Egypt, Moses went to Pharaoh and pleaded for him to let the Israelites leave in peace.

But Pharaoh was a stubborn man, and he kept refusing – even as God sent plague after plague – water that turned to blood, frogs, horseflies, boils, locusts, etc.; it became pretty disgusting. The story tells us that God finally sent the worst plague of all: the death of all the first-born in Egypt – “passing over” the first-born of the Israelites. And on the night of all those deaths, the Israelites gathered up what they could, and left their homes for the land

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promised to them by God. It is this event that is re-told by Jews every year at Passover.

According to the Bible, it was about three months after leaving Egypt that the Israelites arrived at the base of Mount Sinai – “perhaps the most important place mentioned in the first five books” of the Bible, according to author Bruce Feiler. But despite its importance, no one seems to agree which mountain is actually Mt. Sinai! Biblical scholars and scientists have suggested twenty-two different possibilities, “from Egypt to the Sinai, from Israel to Saudi Arabia.”

Feiler tells of one legend that says the mountains of the world were all arguing with each other as to whom should host God. Each bragged of its greatness, except for Mt. Sinai, which said, “I am low.” So, says the legend, God chose Sinai because of its modesty – though the mountain is apparently only half the height of the Colorado Rockies, so perhaps that’s all it meant by claiming it was “low!”

At any rate, it is located in the Sinai desert, and when Feiler climbed to the top of it, he discovered the crater of an extinct volcano – which might explain why the Bible describes it as covered in clouds and shaking violently!

The story tells us that God calls to Moses out of the clouds, and instructs him to climb to the top of the mountain, where He presents Moses with stone tablets on which are written the first ten laws – or commandments – which the Israelites are to follow.

Peter J. Gomes, minister of Harvard’s Memorial Church, writes that “Before delivery of the Commandments, the people are a rowdy assortment of individuals with private and personal agenda; after the law, they become the ‘people of God.’”

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German theologian Paul Tillich defined faith as reflective of that which is of “ultimate concern” to us. What does our life reflect? he asked. This is our god – “the one before which we have no other.” Says Rev. Nelson, “The first Commandment has to do with ultimacy, with what lays claim to our lives. It is,” he contends, “about obedience.”

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## The Seventh Commandment: Thou Shall Not Commit Adultery

February 7, 2010

*The Reverend Anne Felton Hines*

From the fifth book of the Torah, the Book of Deuteronomy: “Moses called all Israel together and said to them, ‘Listen, Israel, to the laws and customs that I proclaim to you today....Yahweh our God made a covenant with us....not with our ancestors, but with us, with all of us alive here today. On the mountain, from the heart of the fire, Yahweh spoke to you face to face....”

Over the past few years, the laws of which Moses spoke – what we know as the Ten Commandments – have become quite a matter of controversy, as fundamentalist Christians have tried to have them displayed on various government properties. In some cases they have won their court battles, and in other cases they have lost. (Guess which side of the battle I usually come down on? J)

Unfortunately, I think these controversies have resulted in Unitarian Universalists – and probably even many progressive Christians and Jews – losing sight of any good that might be contained in these laws that have guided both Judaism and Christianity for so many centuries. So I’ve decided to embark on a ten-part series to explore what meaning, if any, each of these Commandments have for us today. It won’t be a continuous series, as there are too many other sermon topics that need addressing at particular times of the church year. But I will try to get through all ten by the end of June or July.

To understand the importance of what is often called the “Laws of Moses,” we need to remember the story that led up to them – as told in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy (as well as the movie with Charlton Heston!). As you know, the Israelites had been slaves for generations in Egypt. And Moses – by birth not Egyptian, but raised by the Egyptian king’s daughter – had fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian who he’d seen hitting one of the slaves.

While in exile, Moses married and became a shepherd; he was happy in this peaceful existence. But one day, God appeared to him as a burning bush, and persuaded Moses to return to Egypt and lead his people, the Israelites, to freedom. Once back in Egypt, Moses went to Pharaoh and pleaded for him to let the Israelites leave in peace.

But Pharaoh was a stubborn man, and he kept refusing – even as God sent plague after plague – water that turned to blood, frogs, horseflies, boils, locusts, etc.; it became pretty disgusting. The story tells us that God finally sent the worst plague of all: the death of all the first-born in Egypt – “passing over” the first-born of the Israelites. And on the night of all those deaths, the Israelites gathered up what they could, and left their homes for the land

## The Commandment Series

promised to them by God. It is this event that is re-told by Jews every year at Passover.

According to the Bible, it was about three months after leaving Egypt that the Israelites arrived at the base of Mount Sinai – “perhaps the most important place mentioned in the first five books” of the Bible, according to author Bruce Feiler. But despite its importance, no one seems to agree which mountain is actually Mt. Sinai! Biblical scholars and scientists have suggested twenty-two different possibilities, “from Egypt to the Sinai, from Israel to Saudi Arabia.”

Feiler tells of one legend that says the mountains of the world were all arguing with each other as to whom should host God. Each bragged of its greatness, except for Mt. Sinai, which said, “I am low.” So, says the legend, God chose Sinai because of its modesty – though the mountain is apparently only half the height of the Colorado Rockies, so perhaps that’s all it meant by claiming it was “low!”

At any rate, it is located in the Sinai desert, and when Feiler climbed to the top of it, he discovered the crater of an extinct volcano – which might explain why the Bible describes it as covered in clouds and shaking violently!

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## The Eighth Commandment: You Shall Not Steal

*April 11, 2010*

*The Reverend Anne Felton Hines*

My best friend in high school taught me how to shoplift. We were in a shoe store one day, and as we stood waiting for the cashier, Susan whispered to me, “Open your bag!” Not being one to disobey orders, especially when spoken with such urgency, I opened my bag, and Susan dropped in a pair of beautiful slippers. At that moment the clerk came over and proceeded to ring up our purchases, and we walked out – the stolen goods in my bag.

I was stunned – not that my best friend would steal – her family was barely making it, and I’d already heard stories of her and her four siblings stealing food for special occasions, and even their Christmas trees every year. These slippers, she said, were her mother’s birthday gift.

No, I was stunned at the ease of the theft, and the lack of guilt I felt about it.

And so I tried it myself a few days later, at the Thrifty Drug Store near my house. For some reason I chose a pack of bath oil balls – I really don’t know why, since that wasn’t something I was prone to use. At any rate, I looked around, saw no one nearby, dropped them into my purse and left the store.

But by the time I arrived home, I was so wracked with guilt and fear that I was never able to use the product. I think I ended up throwing them away.

Because you see, I knew I didn’t need to steal like my friend Susan. While my family was far from rich, I never wondered if we’d have a feast on Thanksgiving, or a fully-decorated tree for Christmas. Any poverty I experienced was due solely to my own irresponsible spending.

I knew that for me to steal was wrong. It’s what my parents taught me; it’s what my teachers taught me; and it’s what my church taught me. “Thou shalt not steal” said the 8th Commandment handed down to the Israelites by God as they made their exodus from slavery to the Promised Land.

But I imagine that the writers of the Biblical story of the Exodus included this Commandment as one of the “top ten” because they knew how tempting theft could become to any of us, but especially to a group of people tasting freedom for the first time – some had neverknown it; but also facing hunger, fear, and at times, desperation.

The recorders of that story knew how imperative it was that people respect each other’s property, if they were to be successful in sustaining a community. So you see, they wouldn’t have let my friend Susan off the hook either.

When we steal what belongs to another, we allow ourselves to pretend that it won’t affect them, and that they are not connected to us in any way. The items I stole in my youth were pretty insignificant. But the act itself was not insignificant, because in that moment I forgot that I was affecting another

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human being – even if that human being was represented by a drug store chain (which did, incidentally, go out-of-business years later; I hope my theft was not the beginning of its demise!).

Much more significant because of their magnitude, of course, are the thefts that have been perpetrated on innocent people and the general public by corporate giants such as Enron, and the savings & loan scandals of the '80s, stock brokers like Bernie Madoff, and the risky bank practices that helped push us into our current recession.

Writing even before this latest economic crisis, journalist and author Chris Hedges accused “the accounting industry, stock analysts, regulatory agencies, investment bankers and heads of corporations,” of “robbing the public.”

And most of the time they're able to get away with little, if any, legal or financial consequences to themselves. But they are also able to get away with it morally because they have already dismissed any spiritual connection that they have to their clients; they have forgotten that they are part of the human family, connected to us all. The people who have made their decisions to rob the public have already robbed themselves of any spiritual wholeness.

That's why most Biblical scholars tell us that the 8th Commandment is about much more than only theft of another's property. It really has to do with theft of another's humanity, and indeed, the humanity of the thief as well.

Some scholars would say that to treat someone with rudeness, or in a demeaning way, is a violation of the 8th Commandment against stealing, because it robs the person of self-respect. Most of us here, I am sure, know how it feels to be treated rudely, or to be ridiculed or humiliated. It makes us feel small and worthless. Our sense of our “inherent worth and dignity” is robbed from us, even if only momentarily. It is a form of theft.

A wise sage in 11th century France named Rashi, asserted that the 8th Commandment was also a warning against “stealing someone's freedom.” He was referring to the theft that occurs when people are made slaves, and certainly that is one of the most obvious forms of the theft of freedom.

But even after slavery was ended in this country, the freedom of women and people of color was stolen; indeed, we are still reminded of such theft in the actions of people like the governor of Virginia, who issued a proclamation last week designating April as “Confederate History Month” – as if the Confederacy should be celebrated! True, he later amended it to acknowledge the stain of slavery; but the shadow of racism still runs through his decision, and those who have defended his action.

Freedom continues to be stolen from gay, lesbian, bisexual and especially transgender Americans, every time they are ridiculed, or denied a job, or refused the joy of adopting a child. This congregation has worked hard to ensure that the freedom of gay and lesbian couples to marry will no longer be stolen from them – and for a while we thought we'd won in California. But it was taken back again, and we know that we still have a long road ahead to gain real freedom for all people in this country.

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Depriving people of the freedoms guaranteed to most Americans is the sin of theft just as surely as is the theft of property; and the consequences to the victim are far more serious and long-lasting.

But Dr. Leonard Felder, in his book *The Ten Challenges*, points out that even in our personal relationships we may experience the theft of freedom. Being controlling of others, or possessive, or intrusive, deprives another of their freedom; and it deprives us of our freedom as well when we cause it.

When we think that we know what is right for another person, and spend our energy trying to convince them of our “wisdom,” not only are we robbing them of their freedom and dignity, but we rob ourselves of the serenity that comes with letting go.

When we are jealous or possessive of another, not only are we robbing them of their independence, but we are robbing ourselves of the peace that trust brings, and the faith that allows us to fully love another.

Indeed, breaking the 8th Commandment always hurts us – in some cases, more than the victim of our theft. A couple of years ago I received a letter from a UU colleague – someone I had never met or even heard of – who confessed to me that he had plagiarized one of my sermons; he had stolen my “intellectual property.” Apparently I wasn’t the only one who fell victim to his actions, and it had finally caught up with him. He’d been reported to our Ministerial Fellowship Committee, who put him on suspension, and mandated that he inform everyone from whom he’d stolen, and ask for our forgiveness.

I of course forgave him; in fact, I felt horribly sorry for him. What compelled him to do such a thing? How much lack of faith in himself did his plagiarism represent? How much self-loathing must he have carried afterwards? How did it feel to receive praise from people, knowing that they were unknowingly praising someone else? My heart went out to this man, who was surely suffering far more than I.

Of course, there are some forms of theft that are devastating to the victim, because they prey on the victim’s powerlessness, and steal from them their faith and trust. Perhaps nowhere is this more real than in the cases of sexual molestation of children, particularly by clergy. In the Catholic Church, where this appears to be the most prevalent, the perpetrators are the very people believed to have the closest relationship with God; what must that say to a child who is sexually abused by one of them? What does that do to their trust of God?

Maya Angelou, who was molested throughout her childhood by a family member, writes that “Rape on the body of a young person introduces cynicism; and there’s nothing quite so tragic as young cynicism....” These children who have fallen victim to pedophile priests have had their innocence stolen – their sense of wonder and delight replaced by fear and mistrust, and most likely a belief in their own worthlessness. It is a tragic crime, made more tragic by the Church’s unwillingness to take it seriously.

And finally, Dr. Felder reminds us that while the 8th Commandment admonishes us not to steal, other sections of both the Jewish and Christian

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Scriptures teach that we have “a moral obligation to ensure that others aren’t forced to steal in order to feed and clothe themselves or their family.”

The book of Leviticus – which lays out much of Jewish law – says that the person who owns crops should never reap those crops “to the edges of the field,” or pick up any fallen fruit; that, says the writer, should be left “for the poor and the stranger.”

Apparently Islamic teachings also suggest that “by not giving to the poor,” we break “the flow of how money and divine gifts are to be distributed.”

This moral obligation to make sure that no one feels forced to steal in order to survive, is what I had been taught as a Christian, and was why I was willing to overlook my friend Susan’s theft – even of slippers from a shoe store. Her father had committed suicide years earlier, and left the family with nothing. Susan’s mother was left with five children and no job, and supported the family primarily on social security and other available government subsidies. I don’t know if she knew her children were stealing; being a devout Catholic, I doubt she would have condoned it. Nevertheless, I found it perfectly understandable, and only wished I could do something to make it unnecessary.

But I did not have that excuse; I knew that stealing was a clear breaking of a Commandment. When I stole, not only was I taking someone else’s property, but I was diminishing my own integrity.

And ultimately, Felder points out, the 8th Commandment is about “living with integrity.” The Latin for “integrity” – “integritas” – means “to be whole or complete” – to be “integrated.”

If we look at the Hebrew and Arabic words for “wholeness,” we discover “shalom” and “salaam” – the words that also speak of peace – peace between people and peace within oneself.

The Commandment, “Thou shall not steal,” calls us, then, to honesty, and compassion, and justice, and the wisdom that brings us Wholeness, not only within ourselves, but in our relationships and in our world; a Wholeness that allows us to truly love, and to know that we are loved; and that is always Holy.

May that Holiness abide with us always, and with all who dwell upon this earth.

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## The Ninth Commandment: You Shall Not Bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor

May 23, 2010

*The Reverend Anne Felton Hines*

Dr. Leonard Felder, in his book *The Ten Challenges*, tells the story of a brand new minister who decided to give as her first sermon an exegesis of the Ten Commandments. The congregation was fully with her as she talked about “loving no other Gods” than the one God, and about “honoring the Sabbath” and honoring our parents. She could see them nodding their heads in agreement with everything she was saying as she wended her way through “You shall not kill” and “You shall not steal.” “What a good preacher she is!” she heard one congregant say.

But when she got to the 9th Commandment – “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” heads stopped nodding in agreement, and one very audible person in the back said, “Now our new minister has gone from preaching to meddling!”

Some have said that this Commandment is the most legalistic of all of them – that it applies only to those testifying in a court of law or before the elders of a community.

But Felder says that if that were the case, the Hebrew phrase for “bearing false witness” would have been “Lo ta-eed,” which means “Don’t testify falsely.” But instead the Hebrew is “Lo ta-akneh,” meaning “Don’t respond, or repeat against your neighbor.” In other words, don’t participate in the spreading of words about another – don’t be a party to gossip (which is why those congregants of the new minister didn’t like that Commandment!).

Now we might want to think that this Commandment isn’t about anything we’d be doing – that it’s directed at far more serious situations, such as those found in complex Shakespearian tragedies like *Othello*, where innocent acts and conversations are deliberately misconstrued into something huge and sinister, and where people’s deceitful gossip about others results in murder!

But the Commandments found in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy in the Jewish Scripture were created for ordinary people in the process of seeking their freedom, creating a community, and establishing together a new home. Their purpose was to keep the fabric of their new community intact. So while these ten “Laws of Moses” certainly applied to more extreme examples, for the most part they were speaking to ordinary human acts – in this case, the act of hurtful and destructive gossip.

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And I suspect that most of us have participated in such gossip about someone, even when what is being said about that person may be true. There is something dishonest – or “false” – when we talk about another behind their back, possibly hurting them or their reputation, and maybe even building up our own reputation in the process. Even when what we say holds truth, to speak ill of someone without them knowing is a form of lying; there’s nothing honorable about it.

When I was in my third year of undergraduate school at Immaculate Heart College, I found that friends and I would sometimes spend an inordinate amount of time talking about other students, and even some professors – most of whom were nuns, behind their backs. We didn’t make up stories about them; but we’d share negative information we’d heard that may or may not have been true, or make fun of them – all without their knowing, or course. And we weren’t intentionally trying to hurt their reputation, and we would surely have felt terrible if they’d ever learned what we were saying about them.

But still, there was something that felt good about the gossip – that gave me a feeling of belonging and of being better than someone else – someone made even more vulnerable by their lack of knowledge that they were being talked about, and by their inability to defend themselves.

And then one day it suddenly occurred to me that if I was talking about people behind their backs, undoubtedly someone, somewhere, was doing the same thing about me! And that shed a whole new light on the practice!

You may know the story of the great Jewish teacher, Hillel, who lived during the first century B.C.E., who was asked by an impatient student one day to explain the essence of Judaism while the student balanced on one foot. Hillel replied, “What is hateful to you, don’t do to your neighbor. All the rest is commentary.”

“What is hateful to you, don’t do to your neighbor” – the Golden Rule. If we don’t want false or even true gossip to be spread about us, and if we don’t want to be ridiculed behind our back – or even to our face! – we’d best refrain from doing it to others.

I think that’s in large part what the ninth Commandment is telling us. “Bearing false witness” is hurtful gossip – true or false – about another person. And we need to refrain from it because it tears apart the fabric of a community, whether or not anyone else knows what we’re saying.

Unfortunately, we live in a culture where gossip and innuendos are common in the larger community, and spread quickly – often damaging reputations with lies that cannot be easily undone. This has become especially dangerous because of all the “social networking” sites on the Internet – personal blogs, uTube, and of course Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and all the others; they seem to be multiplying daily!

A couple of years ago a friend of mine had some surgery for skin cancer, and it proved to be successful. Some time after the surgery, a woman in my friend’s church came up to her and said, “I’m so glad to hear that your

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surgery went well.” My friend was taken aback, as she had told very few people about her situation. When she inquired as to how this woman knew, the woman replied, “Oh, your husband posted it on Facebook!”

My friend doesn't use Facebook, so she hadn't seen her husband's posting about her cancer surgery; and she was furious! He, of course, had meant no harm; he had simply been asking people to pray for his wife while she was having the surgery, and then followed up by letting everyone know the surgery had gone well. But to my friend, it had been a terrible invasion of her privacy and a breach of trust. She made her husband promise never to post anything about her again without her permission, and I'm sure he won't!

Now one could hardly call his misstep a breaking of the ninth Commandment. But what if he – or anyone, for that matter – decided to post something about someone that wasn't true – or that was true but was harmful to them? It's no different than any other gossip, except that it spreads immediately to as many Facebook “friends” as the gossiper has – which can be hundreds. And each of them may have hundreds of friends. There is no way to get it back.

It's the modern-day version of the famous Hassidic tale of a student who spreads hateful gossip about one of his teachers. The student begins to feel guilty about this, and goes to the teacher to confess and ask for forgiveness.

The teacher says to the student that if he wants to make amends, he should take some pillows, cut them open, and disperse the feathers to the winds.

The student does this. But when he reports back to the teacher, he's told to now go outside and gather up all the feathers he'd scattered.

“But that's impossible,” says the student; “they've all blown in every direction!”

“Exactly” replies the teacher; “the same is true with words, and the damage they can cause when used hurtfully.”

And it is even more true when those words are posted on an Internet site.

Perhaps the most dangerous examples of the ninth Commandment, however, are false rumors that get circulated that are grounded in our fear of the Other. Remember the white woman in Boston a number of years ago who claimed to be attacked by an African American man? The police spent days – maybe even weeks, I don't remember now – interviewing African American men; and of course, white people in Boston became suspicious of every Black man they encountered.

Come to find out that she'd made the story up – at least the part about the race of her attacker. As I recall, her husband may have been the culprit, but she didn't want to implicate him, and knew that people would easily believe her story about a black man.

And after the Oklahoma City bombing fifteen years ago, the first rumor to spread like wild fire was that it was the work of Arab terrorists – again, a

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story believable to far too many Americans. Until Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols – two white Americans – were arrested, we saw an increase in threats and even violence against people who looked middle-eastern, as well as against mosques.

And today, we see “false witnessing” against immigrants – primarily Latino, who are assumed to be here illegally – by state laws such as that passed recently in Arizona. And TV and radio commentators the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Glen Beck, and Sarah Palin break the ninth Commandment almost daily as they invoke the fear of Socialism and Facism to undermine our country’s President.

These are all disturbing examples of what the ninth Commandment is talking about. They tear apart the fabric of community – a concern that Moses took most seriously when leading his people to the Promised Land. And we must do what we can to counteract such “false witnessing.”

But in my newsletter description of this morning’s sermon, I wrote that we’d be exploring the place of envy in our lives; and that is another aspect of this Commandment about “bearing false witness against our neighbor.”

When I think about the times I’ve engaged in hurtful gossip – in “false witnessing,” I have to wonder what I got out of it, or what propelled me to participate. And I think that it’s been when I haven’t been feeling very good about myself. Maybe I’ve been envious of the person about whom I’m gossiping, or maybe I’m just envious of anybody who isn’t me. But I suspect that most gossip and hurtful behavior occurs when we aren’t much liking who we are.

And the irony is that on some level, we feel even worse about ourselves when engaged in this behavior. Our Responsive Reading this morning ended with the poignant plea, “Help us to be as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be.”

“Help us to be as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be.” In our hearts – in our essence – we don’t like being petty or mean-spirited or unkind. Part of our Unitarian Universalist faith tells us that we were not born in sin, and no matter how far we may fall short in our lifetime, we are still worthy of redemption; we still hold the spark of the Divine within us.

A Jewish Talmudic teaching says that “Gossip is like a three-pronged tongue which injures the spirit of three people: the person about whom the gossip is said, the person who listens, and the person who speaks it.” When we gossip – when we “bear false witness” against another, we hurt ourselves because we are not being “as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be.”

The tenth Commandment tells us not to “covet our neighbor’s things,” and that certainly does speak of envy. But that Commandment is really about our envy of another’s wealth, and has more to do with Greed than merely Envy; I will be speaking about that on June 13th.

But by addressing the human propensity for destructive gossip, the ninth Commandment also invites us to look at our envy of others for who they

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are, and for who we wish we could be. Rather than being about not having enough, this Commandment is in part about our fear of not being enough.

But we are enough, just as we are – with all our imperfections, with all our past and future mistakes. The Holy Spirit of Life accepts us as we are, just like those parties we had as teenagers, when we had to attend the party dressed in whatever clothing we were wearing when we received the invitation. Only in life, it's not about what we're wearing, but who we are; we're invited for the treasures we are.

And so we don't need to envy anyone. We don't need to speak ill – “bear false witness” – of them. Instead, we can “bear true witness” to the preciousness of every person – to the “inherent worth and dignity” of all. We can pray that all “be filled with loving kindness,” because that is, “in our hearts, (the good that) we have always wanted” to be. May this be so for us all. Amen.

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## The Tenth Commandment: You Shall Not Covet Your Neighbor's House

*June 13, 2010*

*The Reverend Anne Felton Hines*

Someone told me recently that they enjoy watching the TV game show, "Deal or No Deal." I'm afraid I may ruin the show for them today – or maybe not; maybe I'll boost their enjoyment of it even more!

When the show began a few years ago, I tuned in because the host was (and still is) Howie Mandel – a very funny man who seems to have no boundaries where it comes to silliness and making us laugh. I figured "Deal or No Deal" would incorporate some of his silliness and fun into the show; how could they not? But I was wrong.

In case you haven't watched the show, it's a game that appeals to the gambler – the reckless risk-taker in us. It takes no particular skill or intelligence to win, as far as I can tell; just pure luck. Contestants are asked to choose one small "briefcase" from among 26 that are being attended by 26 beautiful women. Each case contains a cash amount printed inside, ranging from one penny to one million dollars; the point of the game, of course, is to win that million dollars.

But the contestant can't see what amount is contained in each briefcase. He or she chooses a case at the beginning that they hope contains the one million dollars; it's brought forward – unopened – to rest beside them on a table. They then begin choosing, one by one, the other cases to be opened, with the hope that each one will contain a cash amount other than one million dollars, because they hope that's in the box on their table.

After a few cases have been opened, a man in a booth known mysteriously as "the Banker" phones Howie and makes an offer to the contestant to "buy" the case sitting on the table. The offer is based on how valuable or invaluable that case has become, depending on what cash amounts still remain in the other cases. For instance, if the cases the contestant has opened thus far are all low numbers, that unopened one on the table is more valuable because it could contain the one million, or even a half-million. If, however, all the cases opened thus far contained numbers that were high – maybe one of them even contained the million – then the case on the table is less valuable.

Once the offer is made, the contestant has to decide whether to accept it or not. Howie's question always is, "Deal, or no deal?" If the contestant says "no deal," the game continues with him or her opening a few more cases, and then receiving another offer of a "deal" from "the banker" -- based again on

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the amounts of cash remaining. This continues, with the phone offers becoming more frequent as the game gets closer to the end, until the contestant either accepts one of the offers, or rejects them all and takes whatever is left in the unopened case on the table.

Most of the contestants I've seen – and I've only watched the show a few times because I find it so disturbing – are not wealthy people; indeed, they seem to be mostly young people in their 20s or 30s – maybe early 40s, often just starting out in life. At some point Howie asks them what they plan to do with the money they win, and their answer is often paying off large debts, or paying for college, or buying their first home, or simply being able to afford a special trip for their spouse or parents. Some of the stories are rather poignant.

And that's in part what makes this show so disturbing to me; it plays on the hopes and dreams of vulnerable people; it plays on their vulnerability. In the audience are the family and friends of the contestant who urge him or her on, yelling at them to either accept or reject the "deals." But also in the audience yelling advice are total strangers, most of whom seem bent on always rejecting the "deals;" and often that has devastating consequences. I have witnessed contestants rejecting offers from the "banker" that, while less than a million dollars, are nevertheless more money than the contestant has ever seen – only to end up with nothing more than a few dollars, if that. And they have been egged on not only by their own desire for more and more money, but by the almost crazed fervor of the audience. It's astonishing to watch.

And then, what seems most cruel, is that if the contestant does accept an offer – and many of those I've seen have accepted, but too late for the high amount – Howie has the models open each remaining case, ending with the unopened case on the table, which sometimes contains the million dollars. So the contestant may go from elation at having accepted an offer of 500,000 dollars, only to learn that if they'd said "no deal," they would have ended up with twice that amount. It's heartbreaking to watch their disappointment in themselves.

There is a desperation in the people participating in "Deal or No Deal" – not only the contestants, but the audience as well – a desperation similar to that I've seen in people who are still playing the slot machines in the hotel lobbies of Las Vegas in the middle of the night. It is a desperate yearning to be rich – to have a life different than what one has.

The Tenth Commandment delivered to the Israelites as they journeyed toward the Promised Land read: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house, your neighbor's wife, or servant – male or female, or ox or donkey, or any of your neighbor's possessions." According to Dr. Leonard Felder, the Hebrew for "covet" translates to, "...holding as precious...something that doesn't

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belong to you.” It means to yearn for something “with so much longing that we feel we’ll never be complete and whole without it.”

Indeed, my Jerusalem Bible translates the Commandment as telling us, don’t “set your heart on your neighbor’s house,” etc. It’s not just about wanting something that belongs to another; it’s about loving what they have. It’s about envy grounded in greed, grounded in lack of self-worth.

And that’s what a show like “Deal or No Deal” plays into –our love of the material wealth we think we must have in order to be complete. But that’s never what completes us. Indeed, author Chris Hedges contends that the two most destructive forces to happiness are envy and greed.

Now, envy alone isn’t always a bad thing, suggests the Reverend Anne Gleaves Cohen, minister of the Congregational United Church of Christ in Altadena. “When balanced,” she says, “it can motivate us to change our situation, to move forward in life, to...see and reach for possibilities offered by God’s creation....”

When I first began contemplating entering the ministry, it was a time when more and more women were entering professions formerly reserved for men – law, medicine, politics, even ministry. I was working as a secretary, and knew that without a Master’s degree I would never move much beyond that position. I was envious of those women who were doing more.

For a while I think I probably felt inadequate, sorry for myself, unable to see the possibility of anything more as long as I had young children, etc. etc. But slowly the idea grew within me that perhaps I didn’t need to limit myself; perhaps I could actually move forward and see what possibilities existed for me in “God’s creation.” Who knows if I ever would have even contemplated such a path had I not begun to feel some envy towards what others were achieving?

We can all probably think of some time in our life when envy motivated us to make a change – to begin exercising more, or working less, or changing jobs – whatever improved our life or the lives of others.

But the 10th Commandment addresses unbalanced envy – the kind that is grounded more in greed than in wholeness, and that can end up destroying us, as individuals and as a nation.

In the 1980s we began witnessing a yearning for wealth in this country, perhaps in direct proportion to the rejection of it seen in the ‘60s and ‘70s. We were introduced to a movement of “new age spirituality” and “motivational speakers,” affordable by only middle-to-upper-income folks, and promising a life of “abundance” – usually defined in terms of material wealth. Such wealth was our “divine right,” we were told; and those who didn’t have it had only themselves to blame. Anyone in America could be rich, we were told; all they had to do was take responsibility for their situation. It was what I have called a “New Age Calvinism.”

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One of the results of this period was that Americans began rebelling against paying taxes, especially if their taxes weren't benefiting them directly. In California, Proposition 13 passed, reducing income for schools and beginning the long downward spiral of our educational system that had been so excellent before then.

We are still experiencing the painful effects today – not only from that law, but from a growing disdain for taxes, and for feeling any responsibility for the wider community. We believe we have the right to unlimited riches, no matter how much we already have, and no matter how little others in our communities may have.

Not too long ago I was at a gathering of people in a private home – most of whom were politically liberal, but some of whom were not. Indeed, the owner of the home was a very conservative man, and at some point the conversation turned to politics, and how high our taxes are, and how we shouldn't vote for anyone who might raise our taxes.

I looked around at the home I was standing in, with its expensive antiques, its beautiful tiles, its 60-inch High Definition TV, its beautifully-sculpted gardens – and I wondered: Could this man really not afford to pay higher taxes? I thought of my little rented duplex, my spinet piano, my low-cost Honda Fit, my hand-me-down antiques, along with my closet full of clothes and shoes – and I knew that I could still afford to pay more taxes, and gladly would if it guaranteed good schools, health care for all, and food and shelter for every person now living on the streets.

In fact, I was at Starbucks on Friday afternoon, and when the salesperson rang up my order, he asked the usual “for here or to go.” I asked what the difference would be, and he explained that if I drank my coffee there, I'd be charged tax; but if I left with it, there would be no tax added. I thought for a moment and then said, “For here; I believe in paying taxes!” By the expression on his face, I'm sure he thought I was nuts!

And why wouldn't he? My attitude – while I'm sure held by many of you – is certainly not that of most Americans these days. Instead, we are encouraged to identify with the rich and the powerful – to vent our anger at the poor and at the working class, especially if they're unionized, and to protect the corporate elite.

Chris Hedges, in his book about the Ten Commandments, writes, “We watch impassively as the wealthy and elite corporations rob us, ruin the environment, defraud consumers and taxpayers, and create an exclusive American oligarchy fusing wealth and political power. We watch passively because we believe that we can join the club. Greed inspires us,” he contends, “keeps us silent.” It is, he says, “devouring us.”

When Moses – or Yahweh, depending on your theology – included the 10th Commandment to the Israelites, he was acknowledging their and our

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vulnerability to envy and greed – to always thinking we don't have enough – that someone else has more than they deserve, while we have less. And he knew the danger in that – to ourselves, and to the larger community of which we are a part. He knew that by coveting what someone else has, we give credence to our sense of inadequacy, and risk bitterness towards ourselves, towards the other person, and even towards our God.

By coveting, we continue the myth that what we have is not enough, and we prevent ourselves from being truly happy. By believing that what brings happiness is filling our lives with more and more stuff, we are destroying our earth, and the future of our children. We forget that what's most important in life is our relationships, and – as our Story for All Ages this morning pointed out – our precious memories of those relationships, that bring us warmth, laughter, and even tears.

Chris Hedges suggests that it takes courage to live the 10th Commandment against envy and greed – the “courage to accept that we are not the sum of our achievements or wealth or power, but of all the tiny, unrecognized acts of love and kindness we do....It is in love,” he reminds us, “that we find worth and happiness.”

The 10th Commandment calls us to a simpler life, a life free of the yearning for material wealth, a life where we find happiness and meaning “in the valley of love and delight.” It calls us, in the poetry of Channing, to take joy in the “stars and birds, babes and sages,” in the “spiritual...growing up through the common.”

When we fully open ourselves to this amazingly beautiful “symphony” that the Holy Spirit of Life has offered us, perhaps when then asked “Deal or no deal?,” we will be able to answer with reckless joy, “Deal!”  
Amen.

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