

## **“Bring to the Table”**

**Exodus 20:1-20**

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When I was a kid, every Thanksgiving we would go for dinner at my grandparents house. My grandma was born on a farm in Alberta during the Great Depression, and she had lived through some very tough years of poverty and scarcity, and so at every family gathering, she overcompensated by cooking enough food to feed the entire neighbourhood, and then invited the entire neighbourhood to join in. When we arrived for Thanksgiving dinner, the dining room table and every countertop and kitchen shelf and really any flat surface available was jam-packed with food, every possible dish imaginable, a smorgasbord of so much food that it felt impossible that anyone could ever eat it all.

And we would bring a can of cranberry sauce, bought on the drive over, and dumped into a bowl when we arrived, a red gelatinous blob still shaped like the can it came in. Because really, when Grandma was making so much food, anything we brought was completely irrelevant to the success of the meal. Nobody would've gone hungry without our cranberry sauce. But it was still good for us to bring something – not because Grandma needed it, but because we were part of the family, and that's what families do – everybody has a part to play, no matter how small, everybody has something to bring to the table, whatever you can bring, even if it doesn't seem like much.

And after twelve years living on our own in Ontario, I've come to appreciate those meals a lot more, because for the last twelve Thanksgivings, we pretty much had to make everything ourselves – with no family close by, Thanksgiving was usually just the two of us, and then the three and then the four of us. We'd buy the smallest turkey we could find and try and make a little batch of side dishes that seemed essential to a proper Thanksgiving celebration, and you suddenly realize how much work that actually is, how much time and effort Grandma invested into producing so much food for so many people, and looking back on our complaints about the inconvenience of going all the way to the store to buy one can of cranberry sauce, well, you

realize how silly that is. And now that we're back in BC, we will gather for the first Thanksgiving with my family in many years, and I have volunteered to bring the cranberry sauce, because it's the least I can do. We're family, and in a family, everybody has a part to play, everyone has something to bring to the table, whatever you can bring, even if it doesn't seem like much.

Keep this in mind when you hear the passage we read this morning from the book of Exodus, because it's probably something you've heard before, at some point. We usually call this passage the Ten Commandments, a list of the ten most important rules that God gives to the people of Israel in the wilderness at Mount Sinai, the rules that they are expected to follow on the rest of their journey to the promised land, the rules that will form the foundation of their identity as God's chosen people. And you've probably heard these rules before – they're pretty famous, and for many years they could be found decorating the walls, not only of churches, but of courthouses and parliament buildings and schoolrooms all across Canada and around the world.

Even people who have never entered a church in their life have probably heard of the Ten Commandments, and they could probably even remember one or two of them. The Ten Commandments are famous, instantly recognizable all over the world as the most essential requirements for living an ethical life, this core part of what it means to be a follower of God, one of God's chosen people.

There's just one problem with this. If all you know about the Bible, about the church, about being one of God's chosen people, if all you know is the Ten Commandments, you might start thinking that this is what God is all about – Commandments. You hear this long list of rules, thou shalt not repeated over and over and over again, and you start thinking that this is the most important thing that God cares about, that God's highest priority is making sure that people are always following the rules. You start thinking that what defines us as God's people is our obedience, our ability to properly carry out God's instructions to the letter, no matter what.

And if that's what God wants most – obedient rule-followers who bow and scrape and don't ask questions – well, then that must be what the church wants too – the church's job

must be to become God's enforcers, hanging up copies of the rules in every courthouse and parliament building and school room, making sure that everyone is following these commandments to the letter, calling down judgment and condemnation from on high on anyone who slips up, anyone who falls short, anyone who doesn't follow the rules. And I don't think that's the right way to understand this passage of scripture.

I think it's important for us, as we read this passage, to remember everything that has happened so far in the book of Exodus, leading up to this moment on Mount Sinai – and God thinks we should remember that too. The chapter starts, not with a commandment, but with a reminder: God tells the people, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. At the beginning of this story, the people of Israel were slaves, condemned to a miserable, servile existence building pyramids and monuments to the greatness of their cruel overlords. They were living in a house of slavery, a house where they had no rights, no freedom, no hope.

And then God spoke, God intervened in human history in this incredible, powerful way, God broke the power of the Egyptian empire, humbled their Pharaoh, wiped out their armies, God led the people through the middle of the Red Sea, leading them out of bondage and captivity into a new life of freedom and hope. And at every moment on that journey, God has been with the people, blessing them, guiding them, pouring out all the abundance of heaven on them. All the way through the wilderness, they've been led by God's pillars of fire and light, they've been given water from the rocks, they've been fed by flocks of quail and manna from heaven.

The people of Israel were once alone, captive, friendless, homeless, with no one on their side, no one to protect them and rescue them, but now they know that God is on their side, from this moment onwards and forever, the Lord God is their God, the one who brought them out of Egypt is leading them to the promised land, the one who saved them from the house of slavery has welcomed them into the house of the Lord, to live there alongside their savior and king for all eternity. God has made them part of the family – when once they were orphans, now they've been adopted as children of a heavenly father, God has given them a name and a

legacy, defined their identity in relation to the power and love of the Almighty King of Kings. The people of Israel are part of God's family now, and at every step of the way, God has laid out this incredible feast of blessings for the people – everywhere they look, there is a smorgasbord of God's grace and power and love, all the depths and heights and wideness of God's goodness are all around them.

And now, as they gather at Mount Sinai as the liberated, beloved family of God, now God calls on the people to respond to all that they have received, and bring something to the table. After everything God has done for them, with the amazing feast of blessings God has prepared for them laid out all around them, the people of Israel are asked to bring something to the table, not out of obligation, not out of fear, not out of duty, but because they're God's family now, and that's what families do – everybody has a part to play, no matter how small, everybody has something to bring to the table, whatever you can bring, even if it doesn't seem like much. And honestly, what God asks them to bring in this passage, it really isn't that much. Love God first, before earthly things. Take a day to rest and be thankful every week. Be good to your parents. Don't kill each other. Be faithful and honest in your relationships.

Be happy with what you have. God is not asking the people to do something truly difficult, to build giant golden palaces or temples or cathedrals, to take vows of silence or chastity or poverty – all God asks is for them to bring these simple acts of love and obedience, acts that will enrich their lives and the world around them. God has already prepared this tremendous feast for the people, and now asks them to just stop at the store on the way and pick up a can of cranberry sauce. It's not a lot to ask, not a huge inconvenience; it's just a small way they can participate in the celebration God has planned for them. By giving them the law, God is reminding the people that now and forever they are part of God's family, and they have a part to play, no matter how small, they have something to bring to the table, even if it doesn't seem like much.

And what was true for the people of Israel then is still true for us today. Through the grace of Jesus Christ, we have been adopted into God's family – we are children of God, and we have been so richly blessed by our Father's hand. Everywhere we look, we can see signs of

God's love, we can experience the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, we can bear witness to what the grace of Jesus Christ can accomplish in this world.

And as members of the family of God, as God's blessed, beloved children, we have been given the privilege of participating in the banquet that is about to begin in the kingdom of heaven, the feast that our God has been preparing for us since the beginning of creation, we have a part to play in that feast, we have something to bring to that table. Our God has given us a path to follow, structure and guidelines to bring order and harmony to our lives and to the world around us, but we don't follow that path out of obligation, out of fear, out of duty. We don't obey God's law because we must.

We follow because when we do, every act of love and obedience we carry out becomes a gift to God in response to all the gifts God has already given to us. Every time we follow these commandments, we are adding our love and service to the banqueting table, bringing our little dish of cranberries to add to the vast feast our God has prepared for us, we are reminding ourselves and the world around that we are part of a family, we have a place at that table, and we have something to bring, something to contribute, we have a way to make the world a little brighter, a little more loving, a little more like the kingdom of heaven.

And it isn't much. All the service we can render, all our obedience, all our love, everything we do for God will always be a drop in the ocean of what God has done for us. And yet our Father still takes what we bring, and blesses it, and adds it to the feast. And so we give thanks, for God's law, for God's love, for our place at the table, for all that we bring, for all we receive. Thanks be to God. Amen.