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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

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Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Ephesians 1:17-23

God

(First in series, The Ten Commandments: More Than They Seem)

You shall have no other gods before me. –Exodus 20:3–

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:1,2) With that statement the great adventure of ethical monotheism was begun. Ethical monotheism is the belief in a Supreme Being who is actively involved in the world. Over the coming centuries ethical monotheism would lead to the establishment of three great religions that would span the globe: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Ethical monotheism would drive the world forward and make it humane. At the same time its perversions would produce among the worst of human abasements. Ethical monotheism would prove to be fire, spiritual nuclear fission, the big bang of western civilization—destruction and genesis, obliteration and salvation.

When the commandments were given there was thunder and lightening and trumpet blast too loud to bear. There were shaking people and a shaking mountain with smoke and clouds rapped around its sides, the top too high to see. Yes, tremble ye well, O ancient Hebrews! Maybe you did not know it but you were standing at the precipice of profound and irreversible change! Nothing would ever be the same. Humanity needed to grow up, God was insisting upon it, and you would lead the way. From that moment on, you would have responsibilities not only to yourselves but to others and to God as well. No longer would it be all about you. Ethical monotheism was born!

That time at the base of Mt. Sinai when the Ten Commandments were given was the only time God would speak directly to the Hebrew people. Every other time it would be through the mouth of Moses or one of the prophets. But this time—this initial notification that a relationship with God carried obligations—this time God did not choose to use an intermediary, this time God spoke for God's self. Maybe the giving of the Ten Commandments was just too important to let it up to Moses. Maybe God wanted to apply the full weight of God's own voice at the beginning of true religion, to something so foundational to living well as the Ten Commandments!

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

So, ancient Hebrews, you wanted to be rescued from your political bondage? Indeed you did, and God was pleased to do it. But it was time for you to learn that the divine commitment to you requires a commitment of your own in return. That is the way adult relationships work. And the first commitment you must make is that of loyalty.

Scholars tell us that the first commandment has two dimensions. It was given both as an instruction and as an announcement. As an announcement, if God had offered a further explanation, perhaps it would have gone something like this:

I am announcing to you that from now on consideration of all other gods is unnecessary. You are freed from concern about them. They have no jurisdiction over you. From this point on you have only one God to whom you need to pay attention, the God you know as Yahweh, or Jehovah. I am the only God for you and you have no need of any others.

To my mind, to understand the first commandment as an announcement enriches it and suggests something that is true for all of the commandments but may be too seldom understood or emphasized. All of the commandments are a gift of grace from God to humankind for our own good; a way of simplifying, at least somewhat, the complexity of living. How difficult it would be for those ancient people to consider the wants and desires of many different gods, to pacify, satisfy, appease, or mollify them all. Surely, to have one God, to need to please only one God, would take some spiritual pressure off. To see the first commandment in this way—as a gift of God to the people, as something to make their lives better and even easier—points also to the purpose of all the rest. The foundational understanding of God from beginning to end in the Bible is that everything God says and does is for our own good. The Ten Commandments were not handed down to the people in order to constrain them and make their lives difficult, or to frustrate them and complicate living. Instead the giving of the Ten Commandments, like everything else God ever does, was for the good of the people then and everyone who would come after them. To follow the Commandments for every generation is not to make life harder, but easier. It is not to make life duller, but fuller.

Here is one more point about the first Commandment as an announcement. The Commandment is really only a matter of logic. If God is by definition the Supreme Being then there can be only one. If there is a God then the need would be only for God to identify God's self, not to distinguish God's self from other gods. A few years ago I was on the Committee which was responsible for planning the Hartford Area Interfaith Prayer Breakfast. The Interfaith Prayer Breakfast is an attempt to bring together people of faith so that we might all approach God together in prayer no matter what our religious traditions or affiliations. On this particular occasion at the planning committee meeting, as we were talking about how to make sure that all believers in God would feel included, a young woman interjected that we were not being quite broad enough in scope. She raised the question of who all we were trying to include. She noted that we were leaving some people out because some religious people believe in more than one God. At the time her interjection threw me for a bit of a loop. Here we were thinking we were very widely embracing indeed and yet we were still excluding some people. But there was

something about her proposition that bothered me although I did not know at the time what it was. After I thought about it for a while I think I understood it. We were planning an interfaith prayer breakfast for people who believe in God. That was its parameters. It was not for people who did not believe in God. Since God is by definition singular (there can be only one Supreme Being, as there can be only one supreme anything), than the idea of believing in more than one God is an oxymoron. We did not need to concern ourselves about those who confessed belief in many gods because that would mean that they did not believe in God. The idea of more than one God is a contradiction in terms and that is what God declared in the first commandment.

So here we have both an announcement and an instruction. *You shall have no other gods before you.* If the people believed in God than they should remember that, and not think anything is equal to God or act as if the demands of something else were as important as those of God. In the ancient Middle East that would include tribute to Baal or the requirements of the other religious cults of the area, but it would also include things the significance of which people of every generation sometimes get out of proportion: things like money and possessions, knowledge and education, power and control, politics and position, sex and romance, and, in our time, science and technology, or even ourselves. These things are important but they are not God, nor should they take the place of God in our lives, and so become gods for us, small g, leaving us with no God!

The first commandment is the one which defines the divine self in the best way that God might be defined for us, simply by saying that God is. The Commandment insists upon the absolute incomparability of God; the Creator, Redeemer, and Ruler of the universe; the all knowing, everywhere present, unlimited One who is in all as well as beyond all; the finally different One from anything or anyone else and thus for whom we can have no terms of description and whose Being is finally beyond our comprehension. God is the one, as the prophet Isaiah once put it, whose ways and thoughts are not our ways and thoughts, whose ways and thoughts as far above our ways and thoughts as the infinite heavens are above the earth. (Isaiah 55:9)

The Ten Commandments begin by defining God and using the only definition of God that there can be; saying simply that God exists, that God is God is God is God, that there is no other and we need no other. And since there can be only one God, to act as if there are any others would just be silly.