I have never preached a sermon on the Ten Commandments as a whole. Here and in previous churches, whenever this passage has come up in the lectionary, I have preached on individual commandments, sometimes paired with New Testament texts – the Commandment about not coveting paired with something Jesus said about money, for example.

In fact, perhaps the sermon that generated the most discussion, disagreement and dis-ease in any congregation I have served was on the commandment not to commit adultery, Jesus’ words prohibiting divorce, and when he said looking with lust was adultery.

People were very uncomfortable with what they heard as the inflexible tone of the sermon. Some said it didn’t respect folks who had been divorced. Others said it was none of my business who did what with whom in the privacy of their whatever. And still others thought Jesus was just plain silly in his comments about “not lusting,” and equating lust in the heart with adultery.

I was shocked. To me it felt like people were defending adultery, divorce and disrespectful behavior.

Today, I want us to think about the Ten Commandments as a whole.

Do you remember Judge Roy Moore of Alabama? He’s the man who advocated placing the 10 Commandments in every courtroom and classroom in the country. He was removed from his position, his judge-ship, because of some of his actions around the Ten Commandments.

Since that time, ex-judge Moore has outfitted a huge stone on a trailer – it’s an enormous rock with the Ten Commandments chiseled into it – and he has been lug-ging this all over the United States and giving speeches about the Ten Commandments, with this gigantic, show-and-tell display.

It weighs about 5200 lbs – that’s over 500 lbs per Commandment. When a 5 ton crane is hooked to the huge, central steel I-beam in an arena to lift that stone, it buckles and droops visibly under the weight.

Jesus once criticized the Pharisees for neglecting the weightier matters of the law. I guess Judge Moore is innocent of that charge.

I would like you think of Judge Moore’s 2 and ½ ton rock as a symbol for the way most people – maybe many of you here – think of the law, and the Commandments, and the demands of Jesus.

They are a heavy load to carry.

They are a huge weight, a burden bearing us down. Here are your ten rules. You better obey them or else … that’s how Tom Long paraphrases this understanding.

Jews seem to be the only ones who remember how they actually begin: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

The laws and commandments and rules of God are set in the narrative of freedom. Let me say that again: The commandments and laws of God are given in the context of freedom from slavery.
The Ten Commandments are guidelines for living as free Xian people: living out our God-given freedom from slavery. Let me illustrate with one of them: You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

You shall not covet. Coveting is actually a form of slavery. Coveting enslaves you to the task of acquiring and possessing all the stuff you deeply desire, the detritus and disintegrated debris of an acquisitive, Capitalist culture. Coveting is a prison sentence. It enslaves you to focusing on possessions. The commandment, You shall not covet is a move toward freedom – freeing you for whatever God has in store for you.

Here is the thematic statement, the summary of this sermon: God has delivered us from slavery. We are most true to who we are really created to be when we are obedient to the commandments and the will of God. They are not a weighted burden, a deep, depressing load we forever have to carry. They are the road, the pathway to freedom.

Serving God only, and not one of the idols of modern culture – that is a path to freedom.

Keeping Sabbath is a prescription for a full spiritual life.

Not murdering, or killing, or demeaning a sister or brother, as Jesus talked about – this is a way of personal forgiveness & communal reconciliation.

There are many ways to steal – some of them involve taking things, others involve co-opting the core & center & well-being of another person.

Bearing false witness means lying. But “bearing false witness against the neighbor” – because it is against the neighbor – violates the commandment in a double way. One is lying, the other is denying the need to love the neighbor.

Not stealing and not lying – being honest with ourselves and honest with & about others – allows us to discover our true selves, and thus to grow toward a fuller humanity.

Honoring father and mother means at least this: realizing and giving thanks for all we have learned, all we have been given, in our families – thus enabling us to become the people we are becoming.

There are some people, of course, who had horrible childhoods & horrible parents. Psychologically, those people’s task is to forget and get rid of the legacy of parents.

I truly believe that there are some people who will learn what it means to honor father and mother only when they stand before God in God’s Realm.

The Commandments – particularly as they are intensified in the life and teaching of Jesus – mark the pathway to real human freedom.

They enable and make possible the journey of true Christian discipleship.

I would suggest that when Jesus cleansed the temple of the money-changers, and the sellers of the only animals acceptable to be used for official temple sacrifices, he was upholding several of the commandments:

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
You shall not make for yourself an idol.
You shall not steal.

At one point in his ministry, Jesus said this: Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and
learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

The will of God – the 10 Commandments, the teachings of Jesus – these are not burdens to be born in weight and grief, heavy loads to carry as our backs are bent and we trudge the pathways of life.

Following the Commandments and the teachings of Jesus and the will of God free us from being enslaved to all the untruths and lies of the world. And, they free us for joyful and faithful Christian service.

For Christ’s yoke is easy, and his burden is light. And in him we shall find rest for our souls.

Amen.