Dancing the Decalogue

The Ten Commandents are prefaced not by an order but by a breathtaking announcement of freedom.

by Thomas G. Long in the March 7, 2006 issue

Something's missing in the current culture war over the Ten Commandments. I knew about Judge Roy Moore, the now-removed chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court who waged and lost a stubborn fight to keep a Ten Commandments monument in his courthouse. What slipped past me is just how much this monument of his weighs: 5,280 pounds, or just over 500 pounds per commandment.

Judge Moore has been lugging this hefty monster around from one public appearance to another on the back of a flatbed truck. Joshua Green, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, notes that whenever the truck returns to Alabama, "a 57-foot yellow I-beam crane that spans the ceiling of the Clark Memorials warehouse drops down to retrieve the Rock from its chariot, and even this one—*a five-ton crane* !—buckles visibly under the weight." I know that Jesus once scolded the Pharisees for neglecting the weightier matters of the law, but somehow this I-beam-bending version of the Decalogue seems way out of proportion.

I mean to make a serious point, of course. In the popular religious consciousness, the Ten Commandments have somehow become burdens, weights and heavy obligations. For many, the commandments are encumbrances placed on personal behavior. Most people cannot name all ten, but they are persuaded that at the center of each one is a finger-wagging "thou shalt not." For others, the commandments are heavy yokes to be publicly placed on the necks of a rebellious society. For such an understanding of the Decalogue, a two-and-a-half-ton rock sitting on the bed of a truck is a perfect symbol. We've forgotten that the Babylonians' gods were heavy idols that had to be trucked around. "These things you carry," Isaiah jabbed, "are loaded as burdens on weary animals" (Isa. 46:1).

Understanding the Decalogue as a set of burdens overlooks something essential, namely that they are prefaced not by an order—“Here are ten rules. Obey them!”—but instead by a breathtaking announcement of freedom: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2). We will probably always refer to the declarations that follow as the “Ten Commandments,” but we can also think of them as descriptions of the life that prevails in the zone of God’s liberation. “Because the Lord is your God,” the Decalogue affirms, “you are free not to need any other gods. You are free to rest on the seventh day; free from the tyranny of lifeless idols; free from murder, stealing and covetousness as ways to establish yourself in the land.”

The Decalogue begins with the good news of what the liberating God has done and then describes the shape of the freedom that results. If we want to symbolize the presence of the Ten Commandments among us, we would do well to hold a dance. The good news of the God who set people free is the music; the commandments are the dance steps of those who hear it playing. The commandments are not weights, but wings that enable our hearts to catch the wind of God’s Spirit and to soar. As Luther wisely advised, “With practice one can take the Ten Commandments on one day, a psalm or chapter of Holy Scripture the next day, and use them as flint and steel to kindle a flame in the heart.”

Robert Wuthnow talks about how we transmit our ethical ideals to future generations by telling stories. “Stories do more than keep memories alive,” says Wuthnow. “Sometimes these stories become so implanted in our minds that they act back upon us, directly and powerfully.”

Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a volunteer fireman and ambulance attendant who, as a child, had to have some of his teeth extracted under general anesthesia. Jack was terrified, but a nurse standing nearby said to him, “Don’t worry, I’ll be here right beside you no matter what happens.” When he woke up from the surgery, she had kept her word and was still standing beside him.

This experience of being cared for by the nurse stayed with him, and nearly 20 years later his ambulance crew was called to the scene of an accident. The driver was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and Jack crawled inside to try to get him out of the wreckage. Gasoline was dripping onto both Jack and the driver, and there was a serious danger of fire because power tools were being used to free the driver. The whole time, the driver was crying out about how scared of dying he was, and Jack

kept saying to him, recalling what the nurse had said so many years before, “Look, don’t worry, I’m right here with you, I’m not going anywhere.” Later, after the truck driver had been safely rescued, he was incredulous. “You were an idiot,” he said to Jack. “You know that the thing could have exploded and we’d have both been burned up!” In reply, Jack simply said he felt he just couldn’t leave him.

That’s the way the commandments work. First comes the experience of being cared for, the experience of being set free, preserved in the form of a narrative. Then there follows the life shaped ethically around that profound story. A nurse saying “I’ll be right here beside you” becomes the action of a man risking his life for a stranger because he knows in his bones that he just can’t leave him. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you . . . out of the house of slavery” prompts us to live lives shaped by the freedom created by that God.

To see the Ten Commandments as declarations of freedom is far more satisfying than hauling around tons of dreary obligation and worrying about whether the springs and shocks are going to hold up on the flatbed truck.