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# Thousand to One

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*Text: Exodus 20:1–17*

Once upon a time, not so long ago, there was a land far away with a custom far out. The citizens cherished this custom deeply. They loved to swing their arms—wild and fast and free. They'd swing their arms all day long. Many even did so unconsciously during their sleep. Of all the freedoms the people enjoyed this they valued most. There wasn't a law on the books to challenge it.

But this custom was not without its drawbacks. While arm swinging was a pleasant pastime it grew to be a problem much of the time. Many of the people suffered from chronic bruising and broken noses. It was tough to shop, to sleep, to eat, and to dress. Hugging your kids was nigh impossible, and come to think of it, it was even amazing there were kids in the first place what with all that arm swinging!

The people of this strange land were convinced no one should infringe upon their freedom. Until one day when with bloodied nose, blackened eyes and bleeding mouth the prime minister declared, "That's it. We've got to do something. I hereby declare that all may swing their arms as fast, far and as frequently as they wish unless it interferes with someone else's security and safety. The freedom to swing your arm ends where someone else's nose begins."

For the first time in the land a command against arm swinging had been enacted. Folks were shocked to hear the word "No" when arms were swung. But soon they discovered that saying no opened up a thousand and one possibilities that never happened before. Parents started hugging their kids. People

started riding bicycles. All sorts of businesses opened now that people could occupy themselves with things other than swinging their arms. Lovers started walking hand in hand. Why, even the birth rate took a sudden turn for the better!

Many people see God's commandments as one big "NO!". The commandments are perceived as a limitation to human freedom and joy, a sure sign that God is a cosmic party-poopster who doesn't want anyone to have fun. For many people the Ten Commandments are unpopular and irrelevant because the only word in them which they hear is the word NO.

To be sure that word is there. The commandments do say no to a variety of actions, thoughts and feelings. It's possible to spend hours describing and debating the variety of things which the commandments prohibit. But that would obscure the fact that every "No" points us in the direction of many, many "Yes's". When the arm swingers finally said no to arm swinging under some circumstances, they discovered a thousand and one other possibilities for their lives. Similarly, every no God speaks to us in the commandments implies a thousand and one possibilities. For every destructive action and thought God seeks to limit by the commandments thousands upon thousands of actions and attitudes are commended and encouraged. In the spirit of Christ's righteousness and freedom we begin to see that the commandments do not limit our freedom but point us in directions of even greater joy within human community. The commandments are signposts to freedom.

That view of the Ten Commandments will inform each day's decisions. Certainly we need to stop and listen to the no of the commandments. We need to take seriously the fact that we fall short of the glory of God and sin daily. It does no good to pretend that sin and suffering and pain and sorrow don't exist. But at the very same time we need to recall that the commandments are fulfilled in Christ and we who are in Christ live in a thousand and one areas of service, witness, joy, fellowship and growth. As soon as sin is controlled and checked in our life the freedom to do so much else is made clear.

The 1000:1 ratio of the no and yes of the commandments is revealed for us in the symbols of worship on Ash Wednesday. The ashes on our brows are a reminder of the relationship between God's no and God's yes, the Law and the Gospel. The ashes are a sign of our sinfulness. Sin so corrupts our world

that all ends in death. The smudge of the ashes upon our foreheads reminds us of the countless smudges of sin that mark our lives. The ashes paint us with the powerful reminder that one day each of us will return dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

But there is something very special about these ashes which enables them to contain great joy and boundless freedom. These ashes which speak "no" to us so loudly also serve as a signpost to joy. For these ashes come from the last year's Palm Sunday worship. They remind us of Christ's entry into Jerusalem which began Holy Week. By his Holy Week death and resurrection he set free from sin and death all those who follow him. Certainly these ashes on our foreheads remind us of sin and death but these Palm Sunday ashes speak of the freedom from sin and the myriad ways in which Christ's righteousness frees us for joy and life eternal. These ashes do carry some sorrow but even more so do they portend boundless joy. They are in themselves a signpost to freedom in Christ.

It is easy by our fallen human nature to look upon the word no or upon the ashes that we bear and see only negative things about ourselves and about the God who seeks to control sin. We're challenged by each one of the Ten Commandments to look beyond the obvious word no to see the implied possibilities that each commandment sets before us. Faith, insight, and above all life in the Spirit and trust in Christ are needed to see the commandments as signposts to freedom. For such faith, for such vision let us beseech God.