There is no ambiguity. There is one God. We know this God and what God wants. We do not murder, lie, steal, or covet because this is not the nature of the God we worship.

To live successfully in community, we must abide by the “shoulds” and the “oughts” of The Commandments. They depict the only way a community can survive and thrive.  In our text, at Mount Sinai God interrupts the Israelites’ journey to Canaan so that God can begin shaping them into a cohesive community. God tells them how to worship; what to eat and not eat; and which leaders to appoint. God also tells the Israelites what will happen to those who break the commandments. These commandments are only a small part of all that God explains during this stop at Sinai, but here the community charter is established. Now that the people are organized, they can proceed.

Of course, it did not work out exactly as God envisioned. Somehow, the Israelites managed to turn a three-month trip into a 40-year adventure. They questioned God’s logic, often preferring to follow their own path. Sometimes they decided that what is right is wrong; what is wrong is right. They asked, “How can it be wrong if it feels so right?” And they chose to do what felt good, despite the consequences. They justified themselves, saying “What is wrong for you might be right for me.”

Despite these arguments, there *are* moral absolutes in the universe. God’s commandments clearly list them. Who would seriously suggest that it is morally permissible to murder, steal, lie and covet your neighbor’s possessions? No reasonable atheist, secularist, humanist, or person of any religious tradition would disagree that these “shoulds” or “should nots” are as absolute and inflexible as possible in any discussion of ethics and moral law. When we choose to live in community, we tacitly agree to abide by the intent of these moral absolutes. Thus, having some *shoulds* in our life is a good thing. When we respect the *shoulds*, our communities and cities are better places to live.

That said, sometimes being a responsible citizen and obeying all the rules all the time gets tiresome. Sometimes we “bend” the rules a bit. Some people openly rebel against the rule of law. They have a problem with authority. They want to blow off some steam, be crazy for a while, flaunt the rules. They want to ignore the “shoulds” and live free from the “oughts.”

Which is why God invented low-fat ice cream! We can enjoy this delicious confection without the accompanying guilt. So, Halo Top says, be self-indulgent. Forget the “shoulds.” Stop “shoulding” yourself. We get it. But the reality is that we cannot stop observing the shoulds. We must, absolutely must, respect the *shoulds*. We owe it to ourselves and to others.

On the other hand, perhaps the ice cream company is touching on something important. There are some things we should stop “shoulding.” For example: Many of us are slaves to *cultural perceptions of beauty and fashion*. Comedian Robin Williams once joked that he used to have an hourglass figure, but his time was up! Stop “shoulding” ourselves about the need for an hourglass figure or for six-pack abs. You are the shape God created you to be. And the $3 socks from Walmart are just as good and warm as the $30 socks from Bombas.

Maybe we think we *should be* *perfect*: perfect parents, perfect husbands or wives, perfect employees, perfect students, perfect neighbors. This is a tough one, because in Matthew 5:48 Jesus says: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” We read this literally and despair because we cannot live the flawless life of a perfect God. We need to revise our definition! For the Greeks, perfection had to do with *function* or *utility*. Something is perfect if it functions in the manner for which it is made. The potter makes a bowl to hold soup. If it cracks and leaks, it is imperfect; but if it holds the soup, it is perfect for its task. God the Potter designed you, made you. You are purpose-built creatures. To the extent that you fulfill the purpose and plan for which God created you, you are perfect.

Perhaps we think we *should be like everyone else*. We feel pressure to match the achievement of our peers, or that our lifestyle should be like those in our income bracket. We are embarrassed when we lag in terms of professional advancement or material goods or financial status. Comparing ourselves to others is hurtful and ultimately pointless. Stop “shoulding” yourself. You be the best you that you can be!

Many of us suffer in a general way from the *“shoulds” and “oughts” of expectations.* In our efforts to meet the expectations of others, we bring calamity upon ourselves physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Striving to meet anyone’s expectations except God’s and those reasonable demands we place on ourselves can have serious negative outcomes. Just do your best, today!

When we need to obey the “shoulds” and “oughts” of the world can be a tough call. The counsel of friends and family is important, but ultimately, we alone decide what we should do. But when God is talking, there is no ambiguity. There is no argument about whether to be obedient. We should. When challenged by the religious leaders, “Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority…’” (Acts 5:29). Jesus said, “You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:14). The Psalmist pleads: “Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it” (Psalm 119:35).

The psalmist highlights an important truth: he “delights” in obeying the Lord. When we do things to help others, because we “want” to and not because we “should,” we experience joy. When can we have that same delight in obeying God’s laws, if the “should” factor is removed. When it is no longer an obligation to serve God, it is a joy. “Happy are those who…delight…in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.…In all that they do, they prosper” (Psalm 1:1-3).

Prayer: We acknowledge you, O God, as creator and as liberator. You are the One who brought the captives out of Egypt and delivered them from the oppression of slavery. You gave laws which shaped how people were to relate to you, to each other, and to the whole environment. You implored people to worship only you, knowing that whatever we put in your place will become the object of idolatry, the priority of our lives. Help us to focus on you, O God, as the priority of our lives. Remind us of your steadfast love revealed so clearly in the new commandment of love which Jesus disclosed with his life and with his death. Speak to us anew as we offer this prayer and our lives in Jesus’ name and for his sake. Amen.

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**Should You Stop ‘Shoulding’?**

Sunday, March 7, 2021 Exodus 20:1-17

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The lesson for today is the Ten Commandments. So, naturally, I want to talk about ice cream. I love ice cream: cones, milkshakes, sundaes, Dilly bars, I like them all! And there are so many flavors today: Moo-llenium Crunch, Cookie Two Step, Oreo Cookies & Cream, Chunky Monkey, Cherry Garcia, Mint Moose Tracks, and Snickerdoodle.

New to the frozen confection game is Halo Top, a company building its success in the *diet* ice cream market. In 2017, Halo Top surpassed industry giants as Ben & Jerry’s and Häagen-Das in sales of pints in grocery stores. Last spring, Halo Top ran a TV spot showing a girl dancing around her apartment eating ice cream while a series of messages flashed over the screen. “I *should* skip meals. I *should* be a size 6. I *should* look like everyone else. I *should* feel bad about dessert.” The tagline: “Stop ‘shoulding’ yourself.”

Halo Top’s mantra is clear: *We constantly tell ourselves things we ‘should’ do…We believe it is time to stop shoulding yourself.* And why not? The packaging of each pint declares in big numbers the calories. The product is made with natural and organic ingredients. Ice cream is a “great-tasting” source of protein. We *should* “stop *shoulding* ourselves” and just enjoy ourselves.

We cannot stop *shoulding* ourselves, however. We *should* obey municipal, state, and federal laws. We *should* wear seat belts. We *should* wear masks and practice social distancing. We *should* pay our taxes. When we look at the Bible there is a slew of *shoulding* involved in being a good Christian. We *should* be kind to one another. We *should* be patient. We *should* share. We *should* put others first. We *should* pray. We *should* love God. We *should* love our neighbors. We *should* be compassionate. We *should* be humble, generous, kind, merciful. You get the idea!

 There isno more famous example of *shoulding* than the Ten Commandments, statutes which remind us how we “should” relate to God and one another. Divided into two sections (God Rules, vv. 1-11 and People Rules, vv. 12-17), The Commandments really are intertwined. Our understanding of neighborly obligations flows from our knowledge of God as the supreme God of creation who demands unwavering obedience and worship.