

**Westminster Presbyterian Church
533 S. Walnut St.
Springfield, IL 62704**

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee
March 19, 2006

Formed By Grace Exodus 20:2

In 1720 the Spanish Governor of New Mexico sent an expedition north out of Santa Fe. A contingent of 43 Spanish troops and 60 Pueblo Indian auxiliaries was to investigate rumors of French encroachment into Spanish territory and to find a suitable location for a military post on the plains. The expedition headed northeast into present day Kansas and followed a Pawnee trail to the Platte River and on to eastern Nebraska. There they found a large Pawnee Indian encampment which included some French traders. When an effort to establish dialogue failed, the Spanish party withdrew and set up camp at the confluence of the Loup and Platte Rivers.

On the morning of August 13, 1720 the Spanish camp was taken by surprise in an attack of Pawnee and Oto Indians, aided by the French. Most members of the Spanish expedition were killed in the skirmish. A small group of survivors made their way back to Santa Fe to tell the story of this major disaster. In 1983 an unusual historical source for this event came to light in Switzerland. It was a painting on a buffalo hide which illustrated the ambush of the Spanish expedition in Nebraska. The hide was painted in Santa Fe by local artists who used the eyewitness descriptions of the survivors to tell the story of the battle. The painting was acquired by a Jesuit priest who sent it to his family in Switzerland in 1758.

When this hide came on the market the people of New Mexico began raising money to reclaim a piece of their heritage. Bumper stickers trumpeted the message, "Save our hide." Today it is on display at the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe. Descendants of the soldiers who died there have been able to go and see the faces of their ancestors. This hide was more than a work of the heart. It was an invaluable resource for helping us discover who we are.

In the 20th chapter of the book of Exodus we find a similar process at work. Here the people of God receive a gift that is rooted in their history. The gift is the Decalogue, better known to us as the ten commandments. We cannot grasp the meaning of these commandments without paying close attention to the prologue which says, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2)." The commandments emerge from the experience of being freed from bondage in Egypt. It is an experience that has taught them that God's grace is stronger than the resources of the most powerful nation in the world. These commandments are the hide which tells us who we are. They are a sign of the grace by which we are formed.

Thomas Long describes how this happens by using a story which he attributes to my cousin Robert Wuthnow. Jack Casey was 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. 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. Jack crawled inside to get him out of the wreckage. Gasoline was dripping onto both Jack and the driver. Power tools were being used to free the driver, so fire was a real possibility. At first the driver was frozen in fear. Then he cried out to Jack that he was afraid of dying. Jack tried to reassure him. Remembering what the nurse had said to him so many years before he said, "Look, don't worry, I'm right here with you. I'm not going anywhere."

Later when the rescue had been completed the truck driver thanked Jack. He was incredulous that Jack had risked so much to stay there with him. He said, "You know that the truck could have exploded and we would both have burned up!" When Jack replied that he just couldn't leave the man, he understood in a new way who he was as a human being. He had been formed by his experience of grace. That's the way the commandments work for us (Thomas Long, *Christian Century*, March 7, 2006, page 17). "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2).

It is this truth that motivates Jesus in the second chapter of the gospel of John. There we find Jesus chasing the money changers out of the temple. Sometimes people express to me some uneasiness with the way money changes hands in our West Narthex on Sunday mornings. In a half humorous, half anxious tone they wonder if we have adopted the practices of the money changers in the temple. But it wasn't the presence of money in a place of worship that made Jesus angry. It was the way the money changers were exploiting the poor. The act of worship required that people trade their Roman money for Jewish money to buy animals for sacrifice. The rate of exchange was exorbitant. The poor were being fleeced under the pretense of worship.

Jesus' anger was directed toward those who prevent us from celebrating who we are as the people of God. When we do that we are giving expression to the fact that we are formed by grace. The money that is exchanged here on a Sunday morning is a sign of God's abiding love for all people. It is a way of affirming that we are a people formed by grace.

During my travels in France I noticed that the ten commandments were often posted in the Reformed churches. They were usually displayed in the most prominent place. This was intended to provide a clear statement of who they were. The most interesting display of the Decalogue was at the Reformed church of Saumur. The commandments were carved into a dark granite tablet and placed in the church about 1640.

In 1685 the church in Saumur was burned to the ground on the orders of Louis XIV as all the Reformed church buildings in France were being destroyed. The Saumur tablet then made its way to a monastery, where it helped to shape the spiritual life of that community. When the monastery closed, the tablet was given to the Catholic church of Varrains. There its witness continued to guide the life of a Christian people.

In 1928 officials of the church and the town of Varrains approached the bishop with an unusual request. They wanted to return the tablet to its original home. The tablet was hung once again in the Reformed church of Saumur after an absence of 243 years. There it is a powerful witness to the grace which is stronger than the powers that seek to enslave and destroy. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2)." By that grace we are formed.

