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Top Ten: First, God, Only

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At the beginning of May, Nancy Lee, I, and Eric Elton, our Mission Outreach Director here at Prince of Peace, traveled to the Dominican Republic. We visited Doulos Discovery School, a K-12 education center in Jarabacoa, in the heart of the country. Our purpose was to introduce the mission and ministry of Doulos to some of our friends who came with us.

I've been to the DR many times through the years, so many times that planning and packing for several days come rather naturally. Getting from sunrise to sunset every day without too much fuss comes easily – I can do it almost without thinking. But you do have to think about it. Whenever you travel to developing countries, there are long lists of “dos and don'ts”. And if you want to be safe and healthy and don't want to ruin your trip, it's always a good thing to not just know the dos and don'ts but to follow the words of wisdom.

Through the years, I've come up with a pretty good, Top-Ten-ish, 10-commandment-y kind of list of Paul Gauche travel wisdom:

- Do not underestimate the sun or rain.
- Do not buy jewelry from vendors on the beach.
- Do not assume everyone speaks English. If you don't know Spanish, speaking English in a louder and slower voice won't accomplish anything.
- Do not assume the cellular coverage is great... or even good. Or even a thing in some areas.

But on the long list of words of wisdom to remember is one item that, next to “don't forget your passport,” is the most important: Do not drink untreated water. All these words of wisdom, of course, are there for a reason. And that reason is **not** to keep you from having fun. On the contrary, these words ensure you are safe and having a great time.

You might recall me saying just a moment ago that I've been there so often that I can plan and pack for several days without thinking about it. To date, I've never forgotten my passport, I've never bought

jewelry on the beach, I make a valiant attempt to honor residents by attempting to speak Spanish, and my phone is always on Airplane Mode. However, even the most seasoned travelers among us can easily forget that brushing your teeth without bottled water or enjoying a freshly washed salad is only flirting with the kind of danger that can put you in touch with one of the greatest history lessons of all time: the Revenge of that last great Aztec ruler, a guy by the name Montezuma.

We're in a series called “Top Ten.” All summer long we'll focus on God's Top Ten – the Ten Commandments. Last week, Pastor Jeff reminded us that they are essential words of life and direction given to people who were shaped by oppression and lost in despair. Words of guidance, direction, hope, and love were given to people who had no idea where they were going or how they would get there. They had no concept of what it meant to be loved, valued, or treasured. The Ten Commandments were given to help them reframe their identity as people set free to live healthy relationships with one another and God. Today I want to focus on the first commandment, the first and greatest commandment, as Jesus called it. And this is important because, in a very real way, commandments 2 through 10 all build on the first commandment.

In Exodus 20:1-3 we read these words from the Message Bible: *God spoke all these words: I am God, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a life of slavery. No other gods, only me.* This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Let's just pause for a moment. What was going through your mind as you heard those words? Let me just read it for you again: *“I am God, your God, who brought you out of a life of slavery. No other gods, only me.”* It's important that we understand that our vision of God really does shape how we understand the commandments in general and the first commandment, in particular.

For example, if we see God as angry, brooding, distant... maybe a god who says something like... *“I got you out of there... now, you owe me!”*, then we're likely to hear those words as limiting and demanding.

If we see God as ancient, irrelevant, and uninterested in our lives... who says something like... (*"I brought you out of the Land of Egypt! Out of a life of oppression!"*), then we'll hear those words and wonder how on earth they could have anything to say to us.

But if our understanding of God is as one who knows us, loves us, treasures us, and guides us, then we will come to understand these words as life-giving, sustaining, healing: *"I'm the one! I am ... the one who got you out of there! I'm the one. I am ... the one who rescued you from the oppressor, who set you free from that life of bondage! No other gods, only me! Don't give your trust, allegiance, or commitment to anything else. I am the Lord, your God!"* Suddenly those words become very powerful and very personal.

Today I want to consider a couple of lenses through which to see the first commandment. This is all about God's love for us. God is the one who speaks to us and says, *"I am yours. I am the one who rescued you, pulled you out of oppression."* If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we'll understand that the first commandment really does draw us into a positive, nurturing, life-giving relationship – into a friendship with God. Sitting with the words of the first commandment, *"I am yours. I am the one who rescued you, I am the one who pulled you out of oppression,"* is a bold reminder that God is available, God is accessible, God is not playing hide-and-seek, but is revealed at every turn if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

I've learned a lot from loved ones and friends in the recovery community. The first step of AA is to admit that *"we are powerless over alcohol, and that our lives have become unmanageable."* The second step is even more powerful: *"We came to be aware that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."* You can talk to any of the dozens of people who attend AA here at Prince of Peace every day of the week that trying to get out from under the oppression of addiction without the supernatural help of God as they understand God is impossible. Only a Power greater than ourselves can do that. The first commandment tells us who God is. The first commandment tells us that God is the one who rescues and releases us from everything that holds us back. This is all about

God's love for us, which says, *"I am with you, I am for you, I am yours. I am the one who rescued you, I am the one who pulled you out of oppression."* So, the first commandment is a call to put ourselves right in the heart of God's love. That, my friends, is God's love in action. And that's worth proclaiming from a mountaintop.

The first commandment also tells us who we are; it reveals to us a way of living in response to this God who loves us endlessly. When we live with the Good News that we are loved and treasured, that creates a response from us that generates new life.

As I mentioned when I began, Nancy Lee and I, along with Eric Elton, our Mission Outreach Director, and life-long friends spent some time at Doulos Discovery School. Doulos is the school in Jarabacoa that Prince of Peace has invested in for over 20 years. While we were there, we had a kind of "first commandment moment" where we took some time to acknowledge God's commitment to setting students free to learn and grow in faith, as well as the commitment that so many people from Prince of Peace and other congregations have made to grow that school.

How we have responded to Doulos, how we've responded to Mission Outpost, the Dental Clinic, the Medical partnership, how we've responded to children, Seniors, to people in poverty, how we've responded to paying down and erasing our debt, how we've continued to respond to God's call to be Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in the community is a reflection of our response to the first commandment, which if you want to boil it all the way down is simply this: *"God, first, only."* No others... because these are words of life. So, the first commandment tells us who we are; people with a love for God that says, *"You, God, are with us, you are for us, we are yours. We are the ones you have rescued; we are the ones you pulled out of oppression."* When we pause to consider God's gracious vision for our lives, how can we not respond with active love for God and others?

Think of it this way: when our friends and loved ones express their love for us, doesn't it naturally create a sense of wanting to respond? So when we hear God say, *"I am with you, I am for you, I am*

yours. I am the one who rescued you; I am the one who pulled you out of oppression," it's natural to want to respond in love.

Let me suggest a way to make this sticky. This week I want to challenge you to sit with the first commandment. *"I am God, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a life of [bondage] slavery. No other gods, only me."* Think about how you understand God. Think about how your image of God was shaped. Ask yourself, what image of God handed to you has been most helpful; what can you hold on to? What was least helpful? What do you need to let go of? Second, how has God rescued you? Where is your Egypt? What far-away-land-of-Egypt kept you back, held you down, wouldn't let you go? How would you say God rescued you from that? Last, make this your daily mantra: "First, God, only."