

Sermon Title: **“Tradition, Rules, and Grace”**

Bible: **Exodus 12:1-14 & Matthew 18:15-20**

When: on Sunday, September 10, 2023

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

### **Opening Prayer**

O Lord, please pour out your grace and mercy upon us. Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

### **1. An Unspoken Prayer Answered: Stop Sign**

Have you had any experiences when your prayers were answered? Many times? How about unspoken prayers? To me, one of our unspoken prayers was to have stop signs near our church buildings. Actually, getting stop signs put into place happened to both churches that I serve. I had not prayed for stop signs, but the stop signs were one of my wishes. So, I called it my unspoken prayer. And it was answered. I worry about the safety of our church members and visitors who come to church. And I pray for travel mercies for those who come to church.

But I did not like stop signs at first when I started driving a car in the United States. Do you like coming to stop signs when you drive? In Korea, there are no stop signs. South Korea is about 4 times smaller than California. The traffic light system is almost everywhere, even throughout the countryside, because they can manage it. There is no need for stop signs in

Korea. When I learned about stop signs at first, it felt inefficient. That's because even though there were neither cars nor pedestrians, I needed to stop and go again and again. Could we have a better traffic light system rather than stop and go? Anyway, I did not like the stop signs. And I need to confess that I was double biased, because I am Korean, and because my first ticket in the United States was for a violation of a stop sign.

After I came to Gilroy in 2018, when there were no stop signs at the corner of 4th and Church, I learned that there had been car accidents at the intersection in front of the church at least once a year. Even I heard about a car accident when I was in church. And one day, I heard that one of our church members had gotten into a car accident near the church. Thankfully there was no injury. But it was a turning point for me. Since then, I had hoped to have stop signs at that corner of our church. Was it okay to pray for stop signs? Was it better to ask the city rather than God? It was one of my unspoken prayers, and now that we have the stop signs, I am so thankful for God's care or some aspect of God's humor in answering my unspoken prayer. At first, I did not like the stop signs, but now I love the stop signs. My perspective on the same stop signs has been changed.

## **2. Passover Meal, Maundy Thursday, and Open Communion**

The first scripture reading from Exodus 12 is about how the first passover was instituted. Have you been invited to celebrate a passover meal or a Seder before? I have missed the opportunity to join a Seder before. One of my favorite professors in the Seminary got married to a Jew. And there was the blessed time and practice of Jews and Christians sharing a table

together. The Seder is the most important of all Jewish household ceremonies. Jews share this meal of liberation, remembering the Exodus from Egypt and rejoicing that the Lord passed over and spared the children of Israel in Egypt. In my understanding, the Seder is a Jewish tradition rather than Christian tradition. It is similar to how we look at the Bible. To us, Exodus is in the Old Testament, which means that we recognize the New Testament along with the Old Testament. To Jews, Exodus is one of the five books in the Torah and in the Hebrew Bible, not in the Old Testament. There is no expectation of the New Testament. In this way, it would be best for us, the United Methodists, to be invited guests, not the hosts, in a Jewish home or a synagogue of the Jewish community, to celebrate the Seder.

What Jesus had on the night before his crucifixion was the passover meal. But Jesus added more meanings through his words and actions. Jesus washed the disciples' feet, just like a servant. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. Jesus also gave us the new commandment to love one another. Because of this new commandment, Holy Thursday is also called Maundy Thursday. The English word "Maundy" comes from the Latin *mandatum*, which means "commandment." As Jesus' disciples, we are called not to be served, but to serve and to love one another.

Jesus took the bread, gave thanks to the Lord, and broke it, saying to his disciples, "Take, eat, this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Then, Jesus took a cup, gave thanks to the Lord, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Drink from this, all of you, this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many, for the

forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” This last supper became the Sacrament of Holy Communion for us to remember the holy mystery in which Jesus has given himself to us.

As United Methodists, we added radical hospitality. We practice open communion! All are welcome to God’s table. We do not ask how old you are. We do not ask if you are a member of this church or not. That’s because the table is not ours, not mine, but God’s table. We welcome everyone, just as Jesus welcomes everyone. No one and nothing can stop God’s unconditional love and overflowing grace! No one and nothing can separate you and me from God’s love.

### **3. Rules and Grace**

When we read the second reading from the Gospel of Matthew 18, church conflict is nothing new, even in the early Christian community. Jesus explained each step of how to take care of the church conflict. Does each step make sense to you? To me, Jesus’ last step is not that simple: “Let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector.” Gentiles and tax collectors were not welcomed at that time. Does this mean that it is right to excommunicate or avoid an individual? When we read the Gospels, we find that Jesus often interacted with gentiles, tax collectors, and outsiders. Jesus called them, healed them, and ate with them. Many religious leaders at that time condemned Jesus as a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Then, what do these steps mean to us? What Jesus expected of the church was to forgive, to heal, and to restore, not to punish.

It does not mean that we do not need any steps or rules. To avoid unnecessary accidents or tensions, we need some rules and guidelines, just like having stop signs. Even in our church, we have the Book of Discipline, which has a lot of explanations and steps about meetings, appointments, member care, leadership structure, church finance, trustees, etc., including about how to take care of church conflicts and complaints. Sometimes the church policy or guidelines might look burdensome or inefficient, but I believe that they can work like the stop signs. And we are Methodists. So, I hope for us to follow them as much as we can. If there is something not appropriate to God's love or not practical for our church context, we can work together to change them or to adjust them according to our church context. That's because the most important priority is God's presence. I hope for us to experience God's presence even in our church policy or guidelines. When I see the stop signs, I feel God's care for our church members, protecting them on the way to the church and from the church. I am thankful and somewhat joyful to have stop signs when I drive. One purpose of church policy or guidelines is to protect you and me, to avoid unnecessary accidents or tensions, and to give us freedom and joy in serving the church and the community!

Throughout the generations and our church history, we have developed our traditions, rules, guidelines, the book of disciplines, and church policies to manage and take care of the church. Let us remember that at the heart of all these, there is God's presence, God's liberation, God's servanthood, God's love and grace. That's because we are the church and

God's children. We are here to be loved and to love. May God's grace and mercy be filled with us, and be overflowing through us to this church and this community!

### **Closing Prayer**

O Lord, you are love. Your grace is upon us. Your mercy is upon us. O Lord, please open our eyes to see your holy presence through this church. This church is your body. You are with us. In Jesus' name. Amen.