

“Ten Commandments or Ten Suggestions?”

March 23, 2003 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

As most of you know, I am a movie buff. One favorite of mine is Mel Brooks, “History of the World – Part 1.” It’s a wonderful spoof and I recommend it for light entertainment. In one scene, Mel Brooks depicts Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai. He is struggling with three stone tablets, crying out, “15 Commandments! I’ve got 15 Commandments!” At this point, he trips, and one of the tablets smashes on the ground. Moses (alias Mel Brooks) pauses a moment. He gazes at the remaining two tablets, shifts them in his arms and cries out, “10 Commandments! I’ve got 10 Commandments!” The upshot of this for me is that we will do anything to reduce the number of commandments!

So here we are this morning. It is Lent, and we have read the Decalogue as part of our service. What do the Ten Commandments mean to us! Our collect for today says we have “no power in ourselves to help ourselves.” That certainly is going to be bad news to all those authors at Barnes & Noble! Psalm 19 tells us that we must revere the law, whatever that means. If that isn’t even, we hear of poor Paul wrestling with the law. He acknowledges that it is good, but that the law only produces sin. Paul adds that we are helped only by the saving act of God in Jesus Christ (remember last week’s sermon about the cross?).

What do the Ten Commandments mean to us, as Christians? I am not going to talk today about whether or not they should be posted in the public schools or public places. As a matter of fact, I think that it’s meaning less to do so unless we learn, teach, understand and LIVE the commandments. For me, that is best done right here in the Church. It’s interesting to note that the goal of the commandments is relationship. The ancient Hebrews show us the way God was molding them into a unique relationship with God and the community. The Ten Commandments are the first kingpin in the moral obligations of the people of God. They affect everything from life, to worship to faith.

For us, the Ten Commandments are *not* the end goal, says Matthew Henry in his commentary on the Bible. They direct us through the busyness of our lives towards the goal of a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ. The commandments are about relationship. They talk about how we are to relate to God and each other. The first five talk about our relationship with God. The second five talk about our relationship with each other. The Ten Commandments are very real for Jesus. As a good Jew, they formed the basis of his law. However, they are not an end in themselves. Remember what I added after the Decalogue this morning? It was those very familiar words from Matthew’s Gospel called the “Summary of the Law.” There Jesus commands us to love God, Love others and to love ourselves.

It doesn’t end here with Jesus. Remember the story of the rich young man? He came to Jesus and said that he kept all the commandments. The Scripture says that Jesus looked at him and loved him! Then Jesus dropped the bombshell ... there is another step. There is something else beyond the law that Jesus requires of us! What we learn is that the Ten Commandments are a starting point, not an ending.

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What do the Ten Commandments mean? If you read what is written in the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, we find some interesting insight. The first commandment shows us that God makes an exclusive claim on us. The second points out that we can’t control God or make God over in our image. The third says that we can’t use God’s name for our control or service. The fourth commandment says a day of rest, and worship is expected ... not suggested! The fifth says we must maintain the family life with honor and respect. The sixth, that all life is sacred. The seventh asks us to protect the unity of marriage. The eighth commandment calls for us to protect against violations of a person (theft). The ninth asks us to protect against the destruction of the community by lies, falsehoods and gossip. The tenth commandment tells us to resist lusting for what others possess. It’s interesting to note that these commandments do not address many of the issues we are facing in life today. There is something more that we need.

What we want is “*ten suggestions*” rather than Ten Commandments. We are not people who take well to commands! John Kavanaugh, in a 1994 article in America, says that we are a people given to exceptions and excuses. We manage to produce an exception or excuse for every commandment when it arises. As a culture, our moral discourse is dominated by context, individuality, personal choice and private fulfillment. We lack an understanding of being a community. We have become a nation of utilitarians and libertarians. Under the guise of “*freedom*” we find a way to avoid any and all commandments.

The thing is, the commandments make us uneasy. For a good number of us, they make us cranky! We bridle and resist limits. We talk about how the commandments are nothing more than guilt trips. We avoid talk and action around responsibility. We are uncomfortable with all the commandments! We have become a people marked by complaining rather than acting. Let ask how easy is it to answer this question, “Yes, but ...” You fill in the blank! It’s just too easy for us.

Jesus takes us back to the law, and goes beyond it to the unexpected. The Gospel of John recalls the Hebrew Scripture and God’s anger. How many of us learned that the God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath and the God of the New Testament was a God of love? I think that God is both love and anger in both places.

What does this Gospel show us? We see enough temptation to create anger in anyone!

What we are presented with in the Gospel of John is another temptation story. A couple of weeks ago we heard how Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness after his baptism. The Devil promised him power, status, possessions if Satan would be the kind of Messiah he wanted. Jesus refused. Last week we heard Peter tempt Jesus by saying that the talk of his passion was not what he expected of a Messiah. Jesus not only refuses this time but also rebukes Peter. The temptations that Jesus be something other than what God wants are constant.

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Today, Jesus is in the Temple. He sees things that aren't what is expected by God. The temptation now is to be “Mr. Nice Guy.” You know the metaphors that fit here: go with the flow; don't rock the boat; be one of the good old boys. What is being asked of Jesus is don't challenge us, don't change us and let us be. The problem is that this is not what God wants! Christianity is not about our comfort, convenience or way. It's about faith, relationship and God's way. In the Temple, Jesus doesn't like what he sees. He takes a stand and acts!

The Synthesis commentary I read on the passage this week made an interesting observation. It said, “God is not Captain Kangaroo.” Maybe I'm dating myself, but do you remember the Captain? He was slightly overweight, never raised his voice and was surrounded by non-threatening characters like Mr. Bunny Rabbit, Grandfather Clock and Mr. Green Jeans! What is hard for us to accept is that God might be angry with us. Give us miracles God, but not rebuke! Give us Jesus the Good Shepherd, but not Jesus who is furious with us.

The Hebrew Scriptures show us a more balanced view of God than we might desire. Many of us were taught that the God of wrath dominated the Old Testament while a God of love dominated the New Testament. This just isn't true. The Old Testament shows us a God who is loving as Creator but can be angry with us over our unfaithfulness. God is not a limp dish-rag or Captain Kangaroo. The good news is that God's anger never lasts. There may be a moment's heat over injustice or idolatry. But what lasts is God's covenant and promise to be with the people of God.

It's the same with Jesus. He can be angry at those who mock God or who are shallow in their faith. Jesus acts out of both love and wrath at times. What is a lasting testament of Jesus is his love and forgiveness, not his anger. Jesus reminds us of the need for the law. Its intent is to keep us searching for a relationship with God. The law points out that we all have sinned (so adeptly noted by Paul in Romans). He recognizes that God is not always pleased with us. God rebukes us because God loves us. Jesus does the same with his disciples.

The questions that we must wrestle with are these: What would Jesus be angry with us about? What would Jesus rebuke us over? The bad news is that we don't keep the law. We are sinners. The good news is that Jesus forgives us and expects us to change! The law convicts us, God rebukes us, and Jesus points us towards a new way of being.

Clearly this passage says of Jesus, “No more Mr. Nice Guy.” What we are challenged to do today is to keep both the Ten Commandments and the Gospel before us. Lent is a time of self-examination. It is a time to recognize that we must seek God and change our lives. Jesus invites us to seek out forgiveness and absolution by our confession. We can call on Jesus for help. Listen to what the Holy Scriptures have to say. Seek out those people who can help us understand Jesus.

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Yes, it's not easy. As a priest, I know that people more readily want a pastor than a prophet. No one likes to be challenged or confronted. The question remains, where is our focus? We receive more complaints in the office than requests for help! Perhaps we need to occasionally stop be nice people and take a stand. We need the law ... and more. We need Jesus to confront us and help us change. It's time to face and wrestle with our sinfulness. It's time to seek God and Jesus. It's time to stop making excuses and exceptions and to build relationships. It's the way of life. May we find to way with Jesus' help. Amen.