

LENT 3B

A priest and a rabbi are walking down the street. Have you heard this one? A priest and a rabbi are walking down the street and they come to a corner and have to part company. As the priest walks away, he waves goodbye saying, "Keep the faith..." the Rabbi waves back, "Keep the Commandments!"

This is the challenge of our lives, we who are both Christians and also heirs of the Jewish spiritual traditions that lead us to self-identify as "The House and lineage of David." We are meant to live by faith. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has freed us from enslavement to sin, and we are positioned to enjoy that freedom (if only we will believe in him.) But the vitality of our Christian lives is not only internal but alive in the acts of charity towards the rest of Creation that demonstrate our faithfulness. Saint Paul doesn't seem to help us much when he insists that the law is no longer important; that faith is all that matters. As a wise woman once said, "Faith is only half the battle." Paul exaggerates and dramatizes and often confuses the likes of me, and maybe you too. Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. So Paul's words about the law's demise must be taken as rhetorical gestures now and again when we consider them in the light of Jesus' own reported teachings.

Today as we consider the Ten Commandments, we try to reconcile their specificity and finality with the mystical promise that faith will see us through our trials and mitigate our sinfulness forever. It may help to remember, with the rabbi, that one can be philosophical and very well-spoken about faith but still rationalize ways of violating all the commandments in various colorful combinations. But not vice-

versa. You can't really keep all the commandments and end up unethical.

And these commandments are really only suggestions. We do have a choice in all of them (A) and (B) none of us is capable of keeping all of them all the time at all. So although we may call them commandments, they truthfully aren't requirements for life. It's not like I get zapped by a thunderbolt every time I do a little light coveting. It's not like our esteemed politicians or advertising executives burst into flame every time they bear a tad of false witness.

Suggestions. God, you know, has a history of giving orders that God knows aren't going to be carried out. Eve and Adam, for example, well of course they're going to eat that fruit that's right before their eyes, prohibition or no prohibition – it's fruit! Likewise, if those paragons of virtue Jimmy Carter and Billy Graham admit to lust, what makes me think I can avoid it? If I say: "Whatever you do, don't think of two scoops of vanilla ice cream with chocolate on one and caramel on the other and just enough whipped cream to make you want more and a cherry on top. Don't think of that, ready, go," even if you're not so interested in the ice cream, you can't help thinking about it. God knew we wouldn't be perfect, and really wants us to know the difference between good and evil, so that we can make good choices, God just wasn't ready for the consequences of our choicemaking facility. After all, God had never had kids before. You have to work with them. They change you.

So we sin naturally. Blame it on the snakes – what a raw deal they have gotten. We sin naturally, and we try to avoid and redirect the consequences. God sets the bar very high, but after the fiascoes in the Garden of Eden, and with Abel and Cain, and Noah, and almost-murdered Isaac, God finally learns to

issue more realistic parental suggestions, ones that we kids can come to understand and embrace from our experience. If we are willing. Killing, stealing, sleeping around, lying, envying, disrespecting your parents – all these are clearly bad for a society. The commandments are suggestions in the sense of when you jump out of an airplane, it's suggested that you pull your parachute cord.

But what do we make of the first tablet, the so-called suggestions concerning our attitude towards God's self? It's important to remember who we're dealing with. If the Creator wanted us to be incapable of unfaithfulness (or sin for that matter) wouldn't we have simply been created that way, and have gotten to skip the whole commandment program? What God realizes is that in order to care for us creatures, whom he has promised not to destroy, God has to work with us. And like all parents, God changes in the process of the rearing. God must deal with us as we are: capable of choice yet filled with animal instincts that influence our choices; pathologically averse to self-awareness and fundamentally inclined to self-interest. Enslaved to self. And yet, and yet, we are deeply interested in the possibility of more; more freedom, more connection with God's vision of Love, more cosmic breadth in the choices we make.

God's benevolent actions – the Exodus, the Covenants, The Commandments at Sinai, and most radically, the Incarnation of Christ – are all taken in loving response to our deep interest in spiritual development and creative wonder. We desire, God responds. God feels as Jim Morrison sings: "The time to hesitate is through." And so God lights our fire, by providing a formula for ethics and for theology via the Commandments and a formula for our willingness to try, delivered in nine words: "This is my child, my beloved, believe in him." These formulas

are God's gift to us. How we respond to them determines what kind of happiness we enjoy. They are landmarks, guideposts, teaching moments along the pathways to a good life.

Of course we have treated them as fearsome and threatening rules, so that we can say "Oh we're not perfect!" when we fail to follow them perfectly. But the truth is, they are benevolent observations on God's part, a detailed description of life well-lived, a formula for our benefit and enjoyment. They are, in Barbara Brown Taylor's words, "The concrete performance of faith." And they provide us with many lifetimes' worth of analytical possibilities, enough to satisfy the most annoyingly argumentative scholars but, at the same time, stand as a clear, simple outline for what works.

The concept of salvation, a life well-lived and sins repented is described with words that in Hebrew derive from the words for space, openness, lack of hindrance, freedom to live. God's gifts are intended to lead us there – out into the open. Perhaps if we were to meditate on this idea for a few minutes each day, we might someday be able to embrace the idea that avoiding sin and loving God is a gift held out to us, not a burdensome accomplishment for which we will someday be recompensed. There is neither Jew nor Greek, woman nor man, slave nor free, but there are indeed would-be commandment keepers and insistent commandment avoiders in all these categories. There are two kinds of folks, and each of us has the capacity to be either kind, our competence is a matter of choice, daily choice, momentary choice according to the loving gifts of God that we either welcome or reject, breath by breath. Now let us just try not to think about that!