

The Commandments and Holy Anger

By: Meagan McLaughlin

March 7, 2021. Today's sermon is on how the story of Jesus turning over the tables in the temple, paired with the Ten Commandments as a guide for our lives, gives us a lot to think about.

Readings: [Exodus 20:1-17](#), [Psalm 19](#), [John 2:13-22](#)

*** Transcript ***

When I was kid I was really strange: I actually loved the rules! I knew them all and followed them, well, religiously. And not only did I follow them, but I made it my job to be sure you did too. I remember being in third grade and getting into an argument with a friend in the classroom, because she wanted to break a rule and I was trying to stop her. I can still tell you to this day what the rule was, why she thought it was okay to break, and why she was wrong. And I remember coming home from school on more than one occasion to report to my mom that my brother hadn't worn his hat and mittens on recess. I had a really good whine to it, too. As my brothers can attest, I was lots of fun at parties! I'm guessing I'm not alone in this.

Some of you, on the other hand, likely follow or followed my brothers' perspective on the rules — that it only counts as breaking rules if you get caught. And someone from a text study this week shared that they have always been inclined not to break the rules exactly, but to push the edge just a bit, just to see how far they could go.

Whatever your perspective, it certainly is a fact, like Mr. Jesse pointed out, that rules are a part of life. Traffic laws, classroom rules, rules against things that harm others, rules that help keep order. And these days, rules for public health: mask mandates, capacity limitations, and distancing — all for the purpose of lessening our risk of catching or passing on the virus that is still circulating. And our motives for following them can range from wanting to protect ourselves and others, to fear of the consequences if we are caught not following them.

For those of us who do like the rules, the first reading today is a real treasure, the ultimate in rule books: the 10 Commandments. Some of us may still be able to recite them by heart: "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God. Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy." Here we have a set of rules that has been handed down to us for millennia, from God!

We as Christians often, I think, overlook the 10 Commandments, perhaps relegating it to a thing we had to learn and study in Confirmation class — perhaps thinking, mistakenly, that since Jesus came the law just isn't important anymore. We may even have heard it said that Jesus came to overturn the law. As we hear our gospel story about Jesus turning over the tables of the money changers and making a ruckus in the synagogue, which could be interpreted to be a story of Jesus tearing down Judaism, it's really important to remember that Jesus was Jewish. As a faithful Jewish teacher, Jesus probably felt about the law and the commandments the way the psalmist describes today — reviving, rejoicing, enduring, true, desirable, sweeter, clear, enlightening. Wow. All of that, for a list of rules, like honor your father and mother, you shall not murder, you shall not steal?

Luther shared a great appreciation for the Commandments, and had actually a lot to say about them — not just as a list of do's and don'ts, but as a guide for our lives. Because ultimately Jesus tells us in

Matthew, like Mr. Jesse pointed out today, the greatest commandment is love of God and love of neighbor. As we humans wrestle with how to live out the law, how to be in relationship with one another, the answer is simply to love.

Simple but not easy. We humans often need specifics to help us get it — specifics like don't covet our neighbor's goods, and don't bear false witness against one another. And still, we fall and get up, and fall and get up, and fall again... Luther makes it clear, as he describes the law, that we will never be able to live this out perfectly. Part of what we learn from understanding the law is that we on our own can't do it. We humans will always and forever need God to help and guide us along the way.

We need to be reminded, often, that the whole purpose of the law to begin with is to guide our life in community, and guide our relationship with God. As Fred Buechner writes, "The difficulty is increased when you realize that by loving God and your neighbors, Jesus doesn't mean loving as primarily a feeling. Instead, he seems to mean that whether or not any feeling is involved, loving God means honoring and obeying and staying in constant touch with God, and loving your neighbors means acting in their best interests no matter what, even if personally you can't stand them."

As Luther says in his explanation of the eighth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," not only are we not to tell lies or slander, but we are to "come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light." Even, to echo Buechner again, if you personally can't stand them.

Simple, but certainly not easy. We will never be able to do this on our own, and we are greatly mistaken if we think we can, or if we think that doing so is required to earn God's approval — that we can simply check the boxes and know that we have made it, somehow. Jesus understands this, I think.

And Jesus, in his zeal in the courtyard of the temple, is reminding all of us of two other very important things about the law. One is that faith is not just about what we do in the sanctuary. Our faith is meant to be lived out in every aspect of our lives, in all of our relationships. As Jesus turns the tables, he is telling the money changers in no uncertain terms that they don't get to profit off of their neighbors in the courtyard, and then enter the sanctuary and feel good about themselves. The 10 Commandments offer us not a way to earn our righteousness badge or as a measure by which to judge others, but a guide for embodying the love of God and neighbor in everything we do — especially with those we don't like. All of this leads us to realize once again that sacred space and our lives of faith are not limited to what happens in the sanctuary, that sacred space is not defined by walls, but by how we live. How do we live sacred space? The barriers are down, and our whole lives become sacred!

The other thing Jesus is telling the money changers and us is that the path of faith, the way we live with God and our neighbors, is not transactional — it's relational. Jesus' burning zeal and passion came from holy anger at the barriers of wealth and privilege that prevented some from having access to the temple. In turning over the tables in the courtyard, Jesus is removing artificial barriers that had been placed between the people and God, ensuring that everyone could enter the temple without going through the money changers.

This is one of the more interesting stories of Jesus we have in our gospels. We don't often see Jesus get angry, but we see today that he did. If you are like me, this can be a really uncomfortable truth. I like the rules, after all, and isn't one of the rules to not show anger like that? And yet, sometimes faithful love calls us to holy anger. And I will admit too, as one who has experienced barriers to the sanctuary in my own life, that in spite of my discomfort with passionate anger, there is something very satisfying

about seeing Jesus let loose today.

This story of Jesus turning over the tables, paired with the 10 Commandments as a guide for our lives, gives us a lot to think about. So I will leave you with just a few questions to reflect on. What about our faith brings out our passion? What are we willing to turn tables to proclaim or to defend? What walls and barriers are we willing to tear down, to ensure that someone who is excluded can come in? And whose wrath are we willing to risk?

As our gospel ends today, there is one other thing to note as we continue our journey with Jesus of Nazareth in these 40 days of Lent. Jesus foreshadows his death, telling them that the temple of his body will be destroyed, and then says that it will be raised again in three days. The disciples, we're told, don't get it then, or in the few days following Jesus's death. It is only after Jesus has risen from the dead that they understand what he was trying to tell them — that he would die, but that would not be the end of the story. Sometimes the old has to die before the new can emerge. Love and life would prevail, even after the horror of Good Friday. And this is the promise of God revealed in all our scriptures: life springs forth in the most unexpected places, and death will never be the final word.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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