

LENT THREE, YEAR B, MARCH 7, 2021

The ten commandments read in today's Old Testament lesson are most often considered to be a set of laws. Actually, they are not laws or commandments because there are no consequences or punishment attached to them for disobeying them. Rather in the Hebrew these commonly known commandments are referred to as the ten words or sayings. I daresay that most of us were taught that these are rules that God has laid down as a test or law to see if we're good enough to get into heaven.

There's a line in the movie, *Princess Bride*, that applies here which is "I do not think it means what you think it means." Most of these 10 words have been misconstrued over time. They are not so much laws as they are God's very practical guide to living a fulfilled and fulfilling life. They are an outline for living together as ethical human beings; a picture of the kind of life God wishes for us. These ten words or sayings developed into a model for the people of Israel to be a different kind of people. So, if you really look at the sayings, they are words about praise, human responsibility, justice, creation, the value of life, the nature of relationships, honesty, veracity, desire and simplicity of life.

In her book, *The Ten Commandments: Laws of the Heart*, Sister Joan Chichester puts it quite succinctly when she says; "the Ten Commandments are "laws of the heart, not laws of the commonwealth. They are laws that are intended to lead to the fullness of life, not simply to the well ordered life. They are an adventure in human growth. We are not so much convicted by them as we are to be transformed by them." In other words, the Ten Commandments need to be written on our hearts. Justice and honest and humane relationships and interactions don't occur just because we can recite these sayings, they need to be emblazoned on our hearts and in our actions.

To understand how these 10 words have been misconstrued, what do you think the third commandment is really about. It says, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." Most people connect this commandment with profanity. But, it doesn't say you shall not swear so the truth is this commandment is not about profanity. A better translation is to say you should not misuse or use the name of God carelessly. To use or misuse God's name carelessly means to use it in a way that is inconsistent with what we know of God.

First of all, people in the ancient world and even today would, in the conduct of normal business, declare, in the name of God, that they would do this or not do that. Such declaration was the equivalent of a guarantee of God's blessing that this verbal contract would be carried out honestly. Unfortunately, people being people, folks would be tempted to engage in such promises knowing full well that they had no intention of following through. God says no this is not what you do using my name. The commandment says you shall not take which forbids you to use God's name unnecessarily especially in interactions with others. The command could have just as easily read do not defraud using my name to get ill-gotten gains or destroy others. So, when we are told not to take the Lord's name in vain it means we are forbidden to bear and use God's name in a manner inconsistent with God's loving person.

But look what we do in the name of God: judge, condemn, ostracize, divide, polarize. We, and everyone who takes their religion seriously—a word that literally means joining the human and divine together—are responsible for more division and discord than any other group in history. We do it in the name of righteousness, orthodoxy, piety,

sacred texts, worship practices, authority, discipline, revelation, and custom. We even do it in the name of the Ten Commandments. We divide, excommunicate, exclude, denigrate, ridicule, and ignore all in the name of our loving God who gathers us together. And each time, every time, we do it we use God's name in vain. We misuse it. The simple fact is that God gathers us together to be in relationship with each other, but when we divide we work against God.

To use God's name in vain is also not just about utterance and it's just not limited to what we say. It includes the way we, who bear the Name of God, and the mark given to us in Baptism, live and act. When we work against the loving instincts of our God, when we fail to ask how we are connected to others or to the rest of creation, we are taking God's name in vain.

Joan Chichester goes further with her explanation of how we misuse the name of God. "We use God's name to manipulate God. We ask God to be on our side, to do our will, to harm the people we ourselves would like to harm. We use God's name to avoid facing our own inadequacies. We ask God to do for us what we ought to be doing for ourselves – feeding the starving, helping the poor. We use God's name to exert power over others. We threaten them with hell. We use God as a kind of club over groups and people and ideas of which we disapprove. Finally, we use God's name to satisfy ourselves of our own piety and righteousness all the while avoiding the hard questions of life around us that God wants us to address."

Sister Joan puts this commandment into perspective when she tells an interesting story about her mother and father. She said her mother had "a salty Irish turn of phrase" where she could excoriate the entire world in one well frozen sentence but never swore profanity. Her father on the other hand, damned everything with alarming regularity but he was gentle and accepting of just about everybody and confronted little or nothing.

According to what she was taught about the Ten Commandments growing up her mother was going to heaven but her father was going to hell because of his profanity. But as an adult she saw things differently. As she writes, "taking God's name in vain is not about swearing rather is about invoking the name of God to justify ungodly things. Those who invoke God to justify prejudice – to tell us who God accepts and who God doesn't; to explain oppressions – to say that God wills servitude for some kinds of people but not for others; to enthrone absolutism to say that these rules, or this institution is the only one beloved of God is not God. When we use God for those purposes, we have taken God's name in vain. We have misused everything that defines God as our loving creator.

The Sufi tell the story of a teacher who sent his disciples to have a new shirt made for the upcoming feast day. The tailor said, "This is a very busy time and so the shirt is still in process but come back in a week and God willing, your shirt will be ready. But it wasn't. The tailor said, Come back next week and if God shines on us your new shirt will be finished. But it wasn't. Come back again tomorrow, the tailor said, and if God blesses us your new shirt will be waiting for you. The disciples explained to their master the tale of the unfinished shirt. The master said, Go back to the tailor and ask him how long it will take to finish the shirt if he leaves God out of it.

The third commandment tells us to leave God out of it when God has nothing to do with what we want to do that is inconsistent with whom God is.

All in all the Ten Commandments or words or sayings are a part of God loving us too much to let us stay the way we are; it is a part of God's efforts to transform us into

what God wants, and made us, to be – loving people who are brought together in community to respect, care and help one another.

The Decalogue is Good News, for it reminds us that God is the God who leads us forward into new life in Christ who calls us to seek justice and love kindness in all aspects of our lives so we too can become agents of reconciliation and peace. With all that in mind, here is a different way to understand the decalogue.

1. Remember to put God first in your life.
2. Remember that God alone should be at the center of all you do.
3. The integrity of your word comes from putting God at the center.
4. Come to worship regularly for it is within the context of a loving, forgiving community that God is known.
5. Honor and respect all human beings.
6. Never take life indifferently. All life, humans and animals is sacred.
7. The gift of sexuality is powerful, don't ever misuse it.
8. Help us to be good stewards of everything you have given us.
9. Help us to be truthful for only in truth do we find peace.
10. Help us to be thankful for all the gifts you have given us.

So this morning, let us embrace the true meaning of the Decalogue and let them transform our hearts. Amen.