

Third Sunday in Lent

March 15, 2009

The Reverend Dr. Smokey Oats

In his revised and expanded version of Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC, Frederick Buechner writes this about "Law": "There are basically 2 kinds:

- (1) law as the way things ought to be, and
- (2) law as the way things are.

An example of the first is NO TRESPASSING. An example of the second is the law of gravity.

"God's law has traditionally been spelled out in terms of category #1, a compendium of do's and don'ts. These are the work of moralists, which, when obeyed, serve the useful purpose of keeping us from each other's throats. They can't make us human but they can keep us honest.

"God's law in itself, however, comes under category #2 and is the work of God. It has been stated in 8 words: 'Whoever does not love remains in death' (1 Jn 3:14). Like it or not, that's how it is. If you don't believe it, you can always put it to the test just the way if you don't believe the law of gravity, you can always step out a 10th-story window."

The reading from Exodus today contains The Decalogue. It's God's revelation thru Moses on Sinai to the people of Israel, and thru them to us – of not just "the way things ought to be", but of "the way things are," the way God meant for them to be, the way he drew it up, the divine design derived from the original thought, the original mission statement, the first Word.

As G. K. Chesterton said, "No one can break any of the 10 Commandments. He can only break himself against them." The commandments not only form the cornerstone of Israel's Covenant, but also contain:

God's "blueprint" for a just society, the rules of the road for that abundant life Jesus talks about in John 10:10.

In his book They Call Me Coach, John Wooden says, "It has always been my philosophy to follow our game plan. If we believe in it, we will wear the opposition down and we'll get to them. If we break away from our style, and the commandments are our style, however, and play their style, whatever is going on in the world, we're in trouble. And if we let our emotions command the game rather than our reason, we will not function effectively. I constantly caution our teams, play your game. Just play your game. Eventually, if you play, if you stick to your style, it will tell in the end. This does not mean that we will always outscore our opponents. But it does ensure that we will not beat ourselves."

That's what the Ten Commandments are - a game plan — principles for life. They don't ensure that we always act the same way or do the same thing every time, but they provide the principles, the parameters, within which we live our lives and play this game in many different ways: the parameters within which we make sure we don't in the process beat ourselves.

Three thoughts to share: then a conclusion

1st - In 1987, journalist Ted Koppel gave what proved to be a very popular commencement address at Duke University. After listing various examples of national malaise, Koppel asked rhetorically, "Now what is the answer to what ails us?" Then he proceeded to go thru all of the 10 Commandments as part of his solution. Here's a portion of what he said:

We have actually convinced ourselves that slogans will save us. Shoot up if you must, but use a clean needle. Enjoy sex whenever and with whomever you wish, but wear a condom. *(Today he might add: Steal as much as you can even if*

you're driving the company into the ground, just don't get caught, and if you do, call it a performance reward, an industry standard, not a bonus.) No! The answer is no. Not because it isn't cool or smart or because you might end up in jail or dying in an AIDS ward, but no because it's wrong, because we have spent 5,000 years as a race of rational human beings, trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes. In its purest form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder. It is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions.

Having jettisoned so much of our moral heritage, having disdained or abandoned "legalism" as unduly constrictive and harmful to human potential, now, in our hour of need, for jobs and mortgage payments and a sense of stability in our lives, for a moral compass to guide us as we make truly tough choices in the days and months ahead, we may, at last, be ready to go back and look again at The Decalogue. Perhaps we, who are aware of and concerned by the moral lapses of our age, are at last ready again to hear the 10 Commandments as a gracious gift of God given for our guidance and grace, a gift to mark the way of right living and to demarcate the boundaries of our willfulness, a gift to light our footfalls on the path of life and to illumine our worlds when the storms of loss, grief, injustice, neglect, or uncertainty threaten.

As Walter Brueggemann says in his discussion of the 10 Commandments, "All persons face the threat of the darkness. All persons, no matter how smart or how rich or how mature, grow weary of dispute and questioning and risk. All persons need those times of 'homecoming' when they can return to the sureties which do not need to be defended or doubted. And that is what Torah {the Law} is. It is a homecoming, like putting feet under mother's table where the old food and the reliable topics and the safe presuppositions are all at work again." (The Creative Word)

2nd - The story is told that Abraham Lincoln, once dealing with a cantankerous committee, asked, “How many legs would a sheep have if you called its tail a leg?”

The committee answered, “5.”

“No,” responded Lincoln, “because calling a tail a leg wouldn’t make it one.”

It’s a picture of our age. Today, too many of us have convinced ourselves that we’re the 1st generation ever to have lived upon the face of the earth,

the 1st to ever have faced some moral dilemma,

the 1st to ever have been confronted by some ethical quagmire. The 1st!

Therefore, we can’t or won’t trust our lives to the old ways and the old rules. We must make up the rules as we go, calling destructive, death-dealing behaviors and attitudes and decisions and values by whatever name we choose, deciding what is right and what is wrong on the basis of the moment, or on whatever is expedient or convenient, or on our self-serving assessment of “what’s right for me?” Sin isn’t called sin. Such behaviors and attitudes are “signs of developmental delay” or “dysfunctions” or “maladjustments” or “consequences of societal forces.”

We tell ourselves and each other don’t trust the old rules. So everyday we jump out of bed and begin acting as if we have no history, as if there were no reservoir of human experience to fall back upon.

Unfortunately, measured by the brokenness in our lives and lack of joy and wonder in our souls, many of us haven’t demonstrated the irrelevance of the old rules, but rather their importance.

Again, as G. K. Chesterton is once reported to have said, “If a person comes to the edge of a cliff and keeps on walking, he will not break the law of gravity, he will prove it.”

Maybe what we need is a simple make-over, a new interpretive angle, a more contemporary vocabulary. Maybe we just need to be cowboys. These are from the Cross Trails Church in Fairlie, TX:

- (1) Just one God.
- (2) Put nothin' before God.
- (3) Watch yer mouth.
- (4) Git yourself to Sunday meeting.
- (5) Honor yer Ma & Pa.
- (6) No killin.'
- (7) No foolin' around with another fellow's gal.
- (8) Don't take what ain't yers.
- (9) No telling tales or gossipin.'
- (10) Don't be hankerin' for yer buddy's stuff.

3rd - In Herman Melville's Moby Dick, there is a description about a ship's lantern that hung in the captain's quarters on the Pequod. No matter which way the ship pitched or leaned in the rolling waves, the lantern always hung down exactly perpendicular to a line drawn thru the center of the earth. As Melville said, it "revealed the false, lying levels" of everything around it. So it is with the 10 Commandments.

God has not left us alone. We're not the 1st generation ever to have lived. We're not left to conjure up the rules of the road for ourselves, out of thin air, in each generation. A reliable, sure structure is revealed to us in the Scriptures. In a world which often appears nonsensical and illogical, hedonistic and morally myopic, an underlying, God-given logic is shown to us in the 10 Commandments.

There is an order to life.

Life is more predictable than it 1st appears.

We don't have to think it all up for ourselves.

We can trust God to show us the way. In fact, that's what "Torah", the Hebrew name for the Law/Commandments, means. It might better be translated more literally as, "The finger pointing the way." Torah doesn't necessarily tell us each and every step to take in life, but it's a ready, reliable guide from God, pointing us in the right direction.

Conclusion: I found this quip in one of my sermon resources:

The real reason that we can't have the Ten Commandments in a courthouse:

You cannot post "Thou Shalt Not Steal," "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery" and "Thou Shall Not Lie" in a building full of lawyers, judges and politicians.

It creates a hostile work environment!

Folks, we got to get busy and get the Commandments back in vogue such that there is no humor in that illustration. It's time to unfurl the 10 Commandments and call people this Lent to commit to following them as God's disclosure of the way life is meant to be lived. It's high time.

AMEN.