

The inner commandments.

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, October 2, 2011, The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 21:33-46.*

It's been said that what we joke about is what we know we should take seriously. And when you get on the subject of the Ten Commandments, there are lots of jokes and expressions of our discomfort that show how important we know the subject is.

A few years ago an educator hung out for a whole school year with kids in parochial school, Hebrew Schools and Sunday Schools, and recorded *their* understandings of the most frequently taught biblical passages, at least what their teacher thought they were teaching them.

- In the first book of the bible, Guinness, God got tired of creating the world, so he took the Sabbath off.
- Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree. Noah's wife was called Joan of Ark. Noah built an ark, which the animals come on to in *pears*.
- Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day, but a ball of fire by night.
- Moses led the Hebrews to the Red Sea, where they made unleavened bread which is bread without any ingredients.
- Afterwards, Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the ten ammendments.
- The first commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple.
- The seventh commandment is thou shalt not *admit* adultery.

But seriously, folks . . .

Take the Ten Commandments . . . please!

My point is not to entertain, but to say that when you get on sacred ground where important subjects are being discussed, many important things about our backgrounds come out, and can get in the way. What many of these children's delightfully tortured sayings have in common is concern with the law, with obedience, and with not getting in trouble. We learn that from an early age, and not just from the Bible.

But because the human race always struggles to figure out ways, codes and laws to enable us to live together, it's hardly a surprise that religion has gotten bound up in law. In fact one caricature of Christianity—and it *is* a caricature— is that it's a “get out of jail free card” when life's troubles, missteps and guilt get the better of you.

And in our tradition, there's an even more direct reason. Because our religious view of the world is forever grounded in the experience of our spiritual ancestors and siblings, the Jews, the law of God is pretty close to the core of our relationship with God.

Repeatedly, in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, which are also our first five books, the Torah, which is translated Law, the Lord asserts the basis of his relationship with the people, the covenant.

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. (Exodus 19.4 ff.)

Those are words of covenant. It's a new deal: obey the law and what I, God, have is yours—including, importantly the land and the people's freedom. This is where we learn that to be truly free, you have to be bound by some consensus, some sort of law. Chaos is the absence of law, the virtual opposite of freedom.

And the law and covenant took the form of not just the ten words from Sinai but a whole compendium of ritual, civil and criminal law—613 laws to be precise.

The law famously repeated by Jesus as the summary of all law, love your neighbor as yourself, is enshrined in those ancient laws (Lev. 19.18).

But there are also highly specific rules—what foods you may eat or not eat, the death penalty for cursing your parents, the differences in punishment when an ox gores a person or gores another ox. The cursing penalty, just to take one example, makes it somewhat difficult for legal and

religious fundamentalists to claim that the Ten Commandments should be hung on the courthouse wall and be followed in all instances.

But because some rules and punishments seem unthinkable to us shouldn't mean we miss how crucial they were in context. They were the means of survival for a nomadic people in a hostile wilderness. They were a very high ethical code.

In the midst of what is now put down as anachronistic and irrelevant you can find some things we might want to reconsider for our own reflection. There's the prohibition against charging interest on loans. There are the Sabbath customs, i.e. every seventh year, all debts owed by Israelites to other Israelites were to be forgiven and all slaves released. Or the Jubilee year, every fiftieth, when all crop land was to be returned at no cost to the original owners. The idea was to prevent a permanently impoverished class from every coming into being. Congress, take note.

Every society, in every era, needs to do its own "Sinai transaction"—to hear the law, to reflect on what it will take to build and sustain a just society, to prosper and to be fair about it.

The subsequent drama of the Bible is the people's recurring infidelity and even criminality, culminating in their loss of everything and exile. In the books of the great prophets you hear them reminding the people of the law covenant they had made and warning of the consequences of not keeping it.

When the exile was over and Jerusalem was rebuilt and reoccupied, what did the builders find in the old wall—in a niche near the Watergate of all places? The scroll of the *law*. It's not for nothing that the central architectural feature in a synagogue today is not an altar but a scroll of the Torah.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the favorite central symbol in Anglican churches was a representation of the two tablets of the law. Go down to St. Paul's Chapel, and the tablets are still there, framed by the rays of light emanating from the name of the Lord himself.

In the evolution of human social life, in its inevitably growing complexity, we see what we'd call its maturing, a move away from relying on laws and rules alone. It's the internal compass that begins to set the direction. It's finding that place within that is pleased to do things and doesn't always have to be told to do them.

You get a hint in those ancient struggles in the struggle surrounding Jesus and his teaching. He said he didn't intend to change the law but to fulfill it. Fulfillment meant a radical focus, moving away from observance of external law alone.

You could hear him echoing the same turning in the ancient prophets.

God speaks in Ezekiel, addressing the returning exiles:

I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and . . . I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit *within* them; . . . so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. (Ezk. 11.17-20)

Jesus picked up on that. It's now a matter of the heart, he was saying. It's not that the law is superseded, or that living a lawless life isn't still the ultimate antisocial act. It's that the relationship to God has to be inner-directed. You can stay on the right side of the law and still be a sour puss, still be unkind, unloving, even heartless, or worse, cruel.

In this religion, which we struggle to practice, we experience as if he were here saying, You can do this. Live on the right side the law, but don't stop there.

The answer lies deep in the heart. We still, for example, struggle with the antidote to terrorism. Someone on fire with hate and determined to destroy can penetrate any wall and outwit even the most sophisticated electronic security, any intelligence service.

Only when the heart is converted will there be peace and justice.

Life isn't about staying on the right side of the law. It's about doing the right thing because it's inherently good. That was the work of Jesus' life, not wholly attained, and left for us to complete.

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325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022