

The Ten Commandments

One of the bittersweet joys of parenthood is helping your teenager get their driver's license. Yes, it is sweet to hang up your taxi driver's hat and turn over the car keys so your children can run some of their own errands and get themselves when they need to go. But on the other hand there is the terror of allowing a person who can not remember to make their bed to take thousands of tons of steel in their hands and hoping they can remember all the driving laws and who has right of way laws and for God's sake, no cell phone when you're driving laws. But I'm not going to say anymore about all that, because that would be a sermon about faith and this is a sermon about law.

Our daughter Adele turns 16 this week. In Maryland, you can get your learner's permit when you are 15 and 9 months. Even though she was away for most of the summer and goes to boarding school in Pennsylvania, we have spent most of the time when she is home trying to get her learner's permit. It's not that she can't pass the learner's permit test- she hasn't gotten to that point yet. But the laws about permits and all the paperwork are more complicated than even Kafka could have ever imagined. The first time we attempted getting the permit, the woman at the MVA said we had to have a copy of her school attendance record. I asked why we needed that. She said that they wanted to be sure that teenagers weren't staying home or hanging out causing trouble when they were supposed to be in school. I wasn't sure what that had to do with driving, but I explained that Adele went to boarding school. You can't stay home when you are in boarding school because you live at the school and you can't hang out and cause trouble because you live at the school and teachers and dorm parents are watching you all the time. At least I hope they are. That didn't make any difference to the Motor Vehicle Administration. She had to have an attendance record from the school. The next time we went, she couldn't take the test because the attendance record had to be on a Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration form. The school letter wasn't lawful. So, on Saturday, I turned the whole thing over to my husband, Geoff. I figured that a lawyer who had spent 20 years in the Navy negotiating federal bureaucracy would be able to negotiate the motor vehicle bureaucracy and that they would come home with the long awaited learner's permit. No such luck. She couldn't take the test because the official motor vehicle administration school attendance record wasn't in a sealed envelope and didn't have the school seal affixed. Well, the law's the law and when she comes home for Thanksgiving, we'll start the whole thing all over again.

The first lesson this morning is about the Ten Commandments. The law for the ancient Israelites, and some would say the basis for all law. From time to time ten commandments are in the news- usually about whether or not it is legal to have them posted in a courthouse or on public property. Some people feel that if we all just obeyed the ten commandments our world would be a better and more moral place. Some say that the commandments were a legal code for keeping social order among a tribe of ancient people wandering far from government or legal systems.

It's probably safe to say that all of us have broken any number of the commandments at one time or another. I feel quite confident in saying that I have never coveted my neighbor's ox or slave or wife. But I have certainly done things I shouldn't have done.

When I was in Catholic school, the sisters taught us to examine our conscience by going over the ten commandments. Having no gods before me meant I shouldn't make anything in my life more important than God. Same thing for idols. Taking the name of the Lord in vain meant no cursing. Remembering the Sabbath day meant coming to church on Sunday. Honoring my father and mother meant being obedient. The commandment against murder was interpreted to mean that being very angry with someone was a sin. No adultery meant no impure thoughts about boys. Stealing meant no taking candy from the store that you didn't pay for and no cheating on tests. False witness was telling lies and coveting something that doesn't belong to you is quite obvious and quite hard not to do.

I've said before that I think we would be more moral if we used the Beatitudes as our moral guide. Even a person who was able to keep all of the commandments all of the time wouldn't be doing everything that God requires of us. If we examined our conscience and asked ourselves if we have worked for justice or comforted those who mourned or really wanted the meek to inherit the earth, then we would be asking ourselves not what sins we had avoided, but what we are doing to bring the kingdom of God closer to this world today.

In the Gospel, Matthew paints a violent and disturbing picture of people who live as if they never heard of the ten commandments. They cheat and steal and murder. But the story is once again about who lives in the kingdom of God and who doesn't. Because the kingdom of God is for all the people who

produce the fruits of the kingdom. Not for the people who follow all the laws and never break a commandment, but for those who try to live as Jesus lived and try to live in service to others.

At 8:00, every Sunday we hear these words, “Hear what our lord Jesus Christ saith: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

It just may be that we need all the help we can get to produce the fruits of the kingdom-the commandments, the beatitudes, the law and the prophets. But the most important law is to love God and our neighbor. That law alone can take a lifetime to obey. Amen