

Calvary Episcopal Church
Ashland, Kentucky
Sermon for March 11, 2012 ~ Lent 3B
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Several years ago, I asked the members of my parish to submit questions they might like to have addressed in a sermon series during Lent. One of the questions turned in for consideration had to do with the issue of a Christian's moral responsibility. "Since Jesus came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, are Christians responsible for obeying the Ten Commandments?"

Now, this is a very good question because we know from Jesus as well as from Paul that "the Law" for Christians is not what is written on stone tablets but what is written on the pages of our hearts. And, we have been taught that it is not adherence to the Law that saves us but that we are saved by grace through faith. There is that stream of tradition in Christianity that says there is a kind of contrast between the Law on the one hand and the Gospel on the other. John's Gospel puts it this way, "The Law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

And yet, one of the ambiguities of our faith is that the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, is still with us. It just won't go away, in spite of our thoughts that it may not apply to us. In the light of all this, just what is my responsibility?

The Decalogue, which we read this morning, forms the core of Torah. We usually define Torah as "The Law," and it is that. But our limited notions of Law require us to inquire further into the meaning of Torah. For Israel, Torah was not so much the rules that were to be followed it was the way that was to be walked. Torah is perhaps better translated as "The Way," or more literally in Hebrew, "the Finger pointing the way." Torah does not necessarily tell us each and every step to take in life, but it is a reliable guide from God, pointing us in the right direction.

The Decalogue is not necessarily a universal set of rules for all humanity in general, though the rabbis have said it was surely offered to all humanity. Torah is given after the Exodus from slavery. Torah is what is expected of God's Chosen People, who by the grace of God are expected to be a light to all the nations, a witness to what God intends the world to look like. The Way set forth in the Torah is derived from our claims about God. God is the Creator and Giver of life. Life belongs to God, not to us. Therefore, we are not free to use and abuse life at our will. Because God has graciously created us and delivered us, here then is how we ought to live. In Israel, Torah is another word for the grace of God.

Ted Koppel gave a commencement address several years ago at Duke University and after listing various examples of national malaise, he asked the rhetorical question, "Now what is the answer to what ails us?" Then, he proceeded to go through all the Ten Commandments, telling the graduates "these are called the Ten Commandments, not the Ten Suggestions."

Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it.

When he told his followers, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," it was another way of telling them, "I am the incarnation, the epitome, the fullest expression of the living out of the Ten Commandments." As Torah was the Way for Israel, now Jesus has completely incorporated and enfolded Torah in his very life. We cannot follow Jesus and simply leave Torah out of it. We are responsible for living our lives in the way he expects us to live if we want to live in that gracious, liberating covenant relationship he offers. Our decision

to respond in faith to his call includes a willingness to please him by living according to Torah...not as rules that earn us anything, but as a discipline that expresses love's response to love divine.

The Ten Commandments are contemporary literature.

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, "Five." "No," responded Lincoln, "because calling a tail a leg wouldn't make it one." That committee looks very familiar. It resembles our age. We so often see ourselves as the first generation ever to have lived upon the face of the earth. Therefore, we can't trust our lives to the old ways. We must make up the rules as we go along, deciding on what is right or wrong on the basis of the moment, on the basis of our contemporary assessment of "what's right for me." Our parents were wrong on so many issues, who says they weren't wrong about everything?

In our modern arrogance, we have decided that we are the first generation in the history of the world to really feel many of the impulses to which the Decalogue speaks: hatred, idolatry, lust, greed, etc. So, every day we jump out of bed and begin acting as if we had no history, as if there were no reservoir of human experience to fall back upon. We believe we are fated to make up life as we go. We believe that it's up to us to reinvent the moral wheel. It's all up to us. G.K. Chesterton spoke to this kind of arrogance in his day when he 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." It's not that we are breaking the rules. Our sad lives are testimonial to the continuing validity of Torah...there is another way. And, we who have heard God call our names and have responded by calling ourselves God's people, are responsible for the contemporary application of Torah. As the people God has chosen to express the divine love and the divine will for all creation, we above all others are responsible for offering the rest of the world the Way which has been so graciously given to us.

The Ten Commandments establish necessary boundaries.

The first boundary, as Martin Luther expressed it, is the one that protects us from too much self-love. Boundary issues are everywhere in our contemporary life. People need boundaries to protect one another's interests, dignity, and integrity. I recently spoke with a man concerning a couple living near him in another town. He told me of the two children of this couple who are simply out of control. After a little while, I asked him if the parents had tried to establish any boundaries for the children. He said, "That's just it. There aren't any boundaries as far as they are concerned. They think the children should be free to do whatever they like with no interference. They do not protect their own privacy or anybody else's from those miserable children."

We are responsible for respecting the boundaries God has established and expressed in the Ten Commandments. We have been misled by some who want to protect our society from the interference of God or from any kind of authority or values. And, then we spend enormous amounts of time and money, writing new laws, which by and large are not less restrictive but more restrictive than the Ten Commandments. Plus, the laws we write are often disconnected from any kind of thought of an absolute moral mind or principle. They are just the rules for now. Well, human society and the Creation as a whole need a way in which to walk. We need boundaries along the path to safeguard and guide us. We need to take the Decalogue seriously and be responsible for embracing it as a way of saying, "YES!" to God who cares enough about his children to provide boundaries that help us care for and protect each other.

This is good news! This is Gospel! As we remember who we are during this Lenten season, let us remember that, by the grace of God and created in the image of God, we are responsible moral beings. The gift of responsibility, accepted and lived out through the community of God's own people, is a gift we are intended to share with our neighbors for the sake of all Creation.