

Lent 3B: Exodus 20.1-17

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In the beginning, there was only one commandment. Do you remember what it was? It was not to love God with all your heart. It was not to love your neighbor as yourself. Love was a given and the source of this gifted creation. The commandment was that humans were not to eat from a tree in the center of a garden.

Has that first commandment ever struck you as strange? Maybe even arbitrary? Since the tree was called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, it seems clear enough that the first people who told this story had something other than God's literal landscaping choices in mind. But still. "Don't eat from that tree ... Don't even touch it." That's the first rule.

You'd be hard pressed to name a story in human history that's been told and heard by as many people as that one has. But consider this. Of the billions who ever heard it, I'd wager that the number of people who were surprised when the first humans did eat from the forbidden tree is roughly zero. By the time we're old enough to know what a story is at all, we know that if someone says don't eat the fruit, someone's going to eat the fruit. It seems fair to say that with the introduction of a single rule, the game of being human was on.

Don't worry. Starting in Eden doesn't mean there will now be eleven points in this sermon on the 10 Commandments. I'm just curious about what commandments are supposed to do in our lives. I'm curious today about what a commandment is for.

Since I happen to be a Christian, I want to name right up front one way I think Christians have often missed the mark badly on this question. Especially us Protestants. We've been known to construct the human storyline something like this. In the beginning, things were great. Then came a few rules, which were probably necessary, given an original unfortunate turn in events involving the aforementioned fruit tree. We're mostly down with the 10 Commandments. In fact, we occasionally like to engrave them in stone and set them up at courthouses, mostly to spite those godless unbelievers out there. Even if the second commandment does tell us not to worship engraved images. But after the 10 Commandments, we say, things got out of hand. Those ancient Hebrews couldn't leave well enough alone, and before long there were 613 commandments in the Torah.

Fortunately, a first century ethical Marie Kondo named Jesus of Nazareth came along. He got rid of all that Old Testament clutter that brought him no joy, and distilled all those rules back down, not to ten, but to only two: Love God and love your neighbor. How nice. The moral life got simple and clear and doable once again.

There are so many problems with this way of reading the Bible, starting with the blunt statement by Jesus himself that he had no intention of doing away with a single pen stroke of the Law. His teachings were meant only to fulfill it, he says. And that word fulfill in Matthew 5, in both Greek and English, doesn't mean to get rid of something. It means to fill something up even fuller, right to the top. To make it complete. Jesus didn't say he was going to teach us how to grow out of needing so many commandments and rules to order our lives. He said all of the

wisdom of the Law and the prophets hangs on the commandment to love with every last fiber of your being.

The Talmud tells us that, "No [one] stands on the words of Torah unless [they have] stumbled over them." It seems truer to say that Jesus gave us even more to stumble over when he added the commandment of love to every last law in the Torah. We haven't fulfilled a law until we have not only kept it, but filled up the act of keeping it with love.

The power of the 10 Commandments and of all of the 613 rules in the Torah is the way they keep us from pretending love is something abstract and interior to our lives. Or that love is something only relevant to certain parts of our lives. The Torah reminded us that love is not a private matter. Love needs to order all our relationships. Love should order how we worship and what we eat. It should determine the structure of our economy and property arrangements and how we resolve conflicts and restore broken relationships. Love matters to the way we work and the way we rest. Jesus seemed to want us to stumble over the demands of love in every aspect of our lives. Don't you think that's why he said following him would cost absolutely everything?

I can see some of you squirming a bit, wondering whether, if Jesus didn't cancel the Law, you violated a commandment that should still be in effect for Christians when you devoured the shrimp mousse on your salad plate at Waffle Shop last week. Well, there's much more to be said and studied on this question. Even St. Peter's vision in which all creatures were declared clean and edible only went so far. This is just one Christian's take, but it seems relevant that the first commandment in the Bible was a commandment for a particular place and time. We don't find people, after the exile from Eden, keeping their eyes peeled for more of those deadly fruit trees. Laws are temporal, not eternal. God and love are eternal, so the rules that order our lives in every place and time need to hang on love of God and neighbor just as the Law and the Prophets did, even if the laws themselves can change and adapt.

Here's an overly simplistic example, but maybe it's useful. There is no eternal divine decree about whether cars should be driven on the right or the left side of the road. But it is quite literally a matter of life and death that any particular society come to a consensus on the matter and find ways of enforcing whatever law they agree upon. What Jesus and the Torah teach is that even our traffic codes are ultimately answerable to the law of love. Love should be the measure and the goal of every last rule humans live by in every time, place, and culture. Which means, I think, that the making and the keeping of rules could be a creative or generative process, not simply a limiting one.

I've been reading slowly through a book titled *The Creative Act: A Way of Being* by a music producer named Rick Rubin. Rick Rubin does not look like the type of a rule lover. In photographs he's usually barefoot in an elegantly spare room furnished only with a meditation cushion, an expensive stereo system, and large windows open to the California ocean. His graying beard is about the size of a house cat. He's the epitome of guru chic.

But Rick Rubin believes rules are necessary to the creative process. For all the need artists have to push boundaries, rules and limitations are just as essential. "A rule," Rubin says, "is a way of structuring awareness."

A rule is a way of structuring awareness. This strikes me as a very biblical understanding of rules. A commandment is not something we're finished with once we've kept it. Or something that establishes us as good people if we keep from violating it. The Law structured

the awareness of the ancient Hebrews and still structures the awareness in different ways for various communities of Jews. I propose that for Christians as well, the Torah, and the 10 Commandments in particular since they're our text for today, can still be a means of making us look at one ordinary aspect of life after another, and asking what love would require of us in it. What are commandments for? The same thing they've been for since the beginning. They're for making sure love makes its way into absolutely everything.

So, here's a proposition for you and for me for the rest of this season of Lent, and hopefully off into the rest of our lives. What if, maybe starting with those 10 Commandments, we saw the rules we live by not so much as boundaries and walls to protect us, but as windows into the world? As ways of structuring awareness. Openings through which we look at more and more of the life we've been given together on this earth and ask what love would require of us in all of it.

As we read the news and shop for groceries and tend flower beds and vote. As we encounter a stranger in pain and confusion or a friend who has hurt us. As we create something beautiful or enjoy something beautiful made by another. As we confront our histories as well as the dangers and possibilities of our future. What if rather than simplifying the moral life, we let Jesus make it infinitely more complex, because wherever we turn our awareness next, we know what he's going to ask of us before we do. Once a commandment, or a parable, or maybe just life itself has captured our attention, he'll say, "Now. Ask yourself as truthfully as you dare, even and especially of this ordinary aspect of being alive in this world with other people, what does love require here? What would love have you do right now? Look at everything in your life through this question. And then live."