

Commanded To Love
John 2:13-22
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 15, 2009

Before there was Miss Manners, there was Emily Post who authored a series of books that set the standard for proper behavior in polite society.

In the preface of her biggest best seller *Etiquette*, she wrote:

“Etiquette...must go far beyond the mere mechanical rules...of conventional behavior. Actually, etiquette is most deeply concerned with every phase of ethical impulse or judgment...since what one is, is of far greater importance than what one appears to be. A knowledge of etiquette is of course essential to decent behavior...the precepts of which must be so thoroughly engrained that their observance is a matter of instinct...”

So Emily Post wasn't just promoting gracious manners at weddings and dinner parties, she especially encouraged the maximum standards of decent behavior in our relationships with each other.

Emily Post's books influenced a generation of Americans and I bet if you looked through your mother's or grandmother's library you'd probably find at least one of her books. Not surprisingly her audience included everybody from all walks of life. Why? Because there's an almost universal desire for set boundaries that make our life together run smoothly. People of good will need and want to know the fixed rules of ethical behavior so they can be included and not excluded from the community.

Long before it was ruled by the Supreme Court to be illicit behavior, American school teachers taught their students the foundational rules for ethical behavior, the Ten Commandments. To make them clear and memorable the old McGuffey Reader set the Ten Commandments to rhyme:

“Above all else love God alone; Bow down to neither wood nor stone. God's name refuse to take in vain; The Sabbath rest with care maintain. Respect your parents all your days; Hold sacred human life always. Be loyal to your chosen mate; Steal nothing neither small nor great. Report with truth your neighbor's deed; And rid your mind of selfish greed.”

Good rules to live by, but nowadays the Commandments are often dismissed for being old fashioned rules made to be broken. Of course it doesn't help when fights break out over whether or not the Commandments should be displayed in the Public Square. These unfortunate controversies, I think, have an unintended consequence: bystanders, people who don't belong to any church, get the clear message religious zealots are forcing their code of ethics down everybody else's throats. Maybe a better plan to promote the Commandments would be for people of good will to simply and quietly agree to live by them, in Emily Post's words, “as a matter of instinct.”

I think Jesus would agree. So much of what Jesus taught warned against following the letter of the law at the expense of living the spirit of the law. Unfortunately that's why Jesus was always under attack. The scribes and Pharisees insisted the Commandments and their derivatives, the Law of Moses be strictly enforced and imposed from above. But Jesus advocated living out the law by instinct because the law should be

written on your heart. It's then you instinctively live out the spirit of the law not because you have to, but because you want good relationships with God and your neighbors.

A scribe asked Jesus, "Rabbi, what is the greatest commandment?" Jesus answered by quoting two separate commandments, one from Leviticus and the other from Deuteronomy. "The first is Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31)

If you carefully attend to these, you like Jesus will grow in stature and in favor with God and man.

That last phrase "grow in stature and in favor with God and man" is a quote from Luke's gospel that describes Jesus' transition from boyhood to adulthood. Which brings us to a very important truth. Jesus of Nazareth is the sole embodiment of the Ten Commandments, that is to say only Jesus perfectly lived out the spirit of the Law. That's why we can say Jesus was fully human. He alone was everything God intended us all to be, human beings living in perfect harmony with God and each other. Emily Post would say, "His observance of the law was a matter of instinct."

One of the consistent themes of Jesus' teaching was the importance of becoming so in love with God so that living out the Commandments becomes second nature and you realize relationships do matter because the only thing you'll take with you into eternity is the relationships you forged in this life. That's why you hear me repeat adinfinitum the mantra, "Christianity is primarily about the quality of your relationships with God, your neighbor and yourself."

And keep in mind your primary relationship with God guarantees all the rest.

That's probably why the first four commandments are all about taking care of your relationship with God and the last six are all about your relationships with your neighbor. In all ten you are commanded to be loving and ethical, compassionate and just.

Jesus was frustrated with the scribes and Pharisees because they insisted on a precise and rigid conformity that bled the life out of the Commandments making it a legalistic document instead of a living, breathing code of behavior.

Living, breathing code of behavior? What does that mean? Let's go to this morning's gospel lesson for instruction. It's the familiar story of Jesus cleaning out the temple, a symbolic prophetic act demonstrating God's annoyance with the sorry state of organized religion in Israel. The Temple priests devolved into power brokers and business managers robbing the life out of their flock's faith and practice. Enforcing the letter of the Law instead of promoting compassionate and ethical behavior forced Jesus to take action. Overturning tables, scattering their coins and driving them out certainly got everybody's attention.

"Why are you doing this?" they demanded. Jesus cryptically answered, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."

Being rigid law enforcers, they automatically took Jesus literally. "It took forty-six years to build this temple and you can build it back up in three days?"

"But," John explained, "he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered he said this..."

The Temple in Jerusalem was the embodiment of the Jewish faith where the faithful could pray and offer their sacrifices. In that sacred space they could commune

with God, meditate on his law, be filled with his presence and then return to their towns and villages to live out God's law by instinct.

But the religious leaders strictly by the book approach kept that from happening and when they accused Jesus of undermining God's Commandments Jesus declared, "I didn't come to destroy the law, but fulfill the law."

Remember what was said earlier, "Jesus was the sole embodiment of the Ten Commandments." Only Jesus perfectly lived out the spirit of the law, in perfect harmony with God and man. And only Jesus, completely innocent of any law breaking could become the sacrificial lamb who would die for the sins of the world. That's why Jesus said, "Destroy this temple (my body) and in three days it will rise again."

Living the Ten Commandments is important and necessary, but remember it can't save you. You can't work your way into heaven. Only Jesus' death on the cross wins your salvation. Then why keep the Ten Commandments? Because it's the basis for the Old Covenant God made with Israel through Moses that Jesus transformed into the New Covenant this time through his broken body and shed blood for the salvation of the world.

Lastly, you keep the Commandments to express your love and respect for God, your neighbor and yourself. When you keep the Commandments there is peace and harmony, when you break them there is needless pain and chaos.

As part of your Lenten devotions, meditate on the Commandments, and the Lord and giver of life, and then allow yourself to become so thoroughly engrained with both, your observance becomes a matter of instinct born out of love.