
Lent and Law and Presumptuous Sins

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Lent 3 – Year B

Have you noticed how prominent the “law” is in our liturgy this morning? We opened with Jesus’ summary of the law, which boils down to this: “Love God and love your neighbor.” Then, we heard the Ten Commandments. Yes, *all ten* of them. Even our Psalm praises the law of the Lord as perfect and just, as reviving the soul and giving wisdom to the innocent and light to the eyes.

I’m thinking there’s a connection, or message, we’re supposed to get here: that biblical law or God’s law has something to do with our journey during Lent—which is a journey of return toward God, through self-examination, confession, and repentance.

A few years ago, I taught a 12-week class at Metro State Prison on the Ten Commandments. I know, you’re thinking that seems like a *really* long time to talk about these ten seemingly simple moral laws. But this was a hot topic at the time, as there was a debate raging about whether they should be posted in an Alabama courthouse, where they could pronounce judgment on offenders and remind everyone who was on which side of the law—and of God.

And you’re probably wondering also how I might approach these commandments with people who had so clearly violated them—who had been publicly convicted of stealing, lying, even killing. And who were bearing out the consequences in visible, tangible, undeniable ways. Well, I did it carefully. And with a whole lot of humility, remembering that they had as much to teach me as I had to teach them.

This morning, I’d like to share with you a few of the things I learned along the way. First, this ten-item summary of God’s law is far from simple. Did you know that different religious traditions delineate the commandments differently? And that the list appears twice in our Bible, with differences between the two versions?

On top of that, there is much debate and even confusion about the meaning of individual commandments. For example, should the text be translated, “You shall not murder,” or “You shall not kill”? And what exactly is considered murder? Does it include killing in self-defense? Does it include war? Does it mean that we all need to be vegetarian?

We’re not the first to ask these questions. In fact, large portions of the Old Testament and of Jewish *midrash* are dedicated to exploring the implications of these laws: what do they mean amid the complexities of real life—especially as these complexities vary across time and across cultures?

Second, as I dug into these commandments, I realized how hard—how downright impossible—it is to follow them perfectly. Sure, I haven’t committed murder, at least not personally. Sure, I haven’t stolen anything, at least not directly, at least not since I took that pack of gum from the grocery store when I was five.

But I sure have coveted. And I’ve had my fair share of idols, and worshipped things and people that promised me control and esteem. I’ve told a lie or two, always for a good cause, of course! And what teenager has not disrespected her parents?

When Jesus comes along, he directs us away from the letter of the law to its spirit—from external actions to internal attitudes, like envy, lust, and hate. Which makes the commandments even harder to fulfill!

Third, this class taught me something about righteousness: as I got to know my students and heard their stories, and as I thought about *my* life in light of the commandments, I began to see how I bore the potential of evil in me, too. And how these “convicts” bore the potential of good, of redemption, too. I saw that we were all sinners, and that we were all also God’s beloved children—that the boundary between righteous and unrighteous, between commandment-follower and commandment-violator, is much blurrier and more unstable than I had realized.

While our study drew our class into community, many people—Christians even—use religious law to exalt themselves, and to condemn others. To excuse them from loving others and showing mercy.

Indeed, throughout history, the very law that God gave us, to help us love God and love our neighbor, has been twisted to justify exclusion, separation, injustice, even violence. In the name of God’s law, parents have abused their children; churches have excluded all kinds of people; slavery has been justified; non-Christians have been murdered.

At this moment, ISIS is justifying its cruelty and killing—and the brutal oppression of women—in the name of God’s law. It is destroying ancient artifacts, sacred to many, in the name of God’s law.

But Jesus would have none of this! He showed that people come before piety—love of God before love of the law. He consistently broke through barriers between groups and people, and exposed those who used the law to divide and oppress. He overturned tables in the temple, and dispersed a crowd, ready to stone an adulterous woman, by asking who among them was without sin and thus could cast the first stone.

“Above all,” our psalmist prays, after exalting God’s statutes, “keep your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not get dominion over me.” *“Presumptuous sins.”* Presumptuous sins put humans in the place of God. Presumptuous sins tout our own virtuosity at the expense of others. Presumptuous sin confuses our own ideologies with God’s will. Presumptuous sin imagines that evil and sin reside only outside of us—in that person over there, or in that group. But never in here.

I think that’s why the Lenten liturgy starts with a summary of the Law, or with the full Decalogue, and why we have the Ten Commandments in our lectionary this morning: because we need to remember God’s law and its claim on our lives. Because it is when we confess where we have violated God’s law of love, and hand our sins over to God, that they cease to have power over us. Because it is when we can acknowledge our own brokenness that we can love others in theirs. Because it is only when we can face our own deep need for forgiveness and mercy that we really know God’s grace.

Of course, it’s hard to admit our sins, it’s hard to admit our weakness; it’s hard to admit our inability to help ourselves. We’re too busy hustling for salvation and love. We’re too scared that we will be rejected, despised; that I’m a hopeless cause; that my sinfulness is too great for even God to overcome.

And so this requires an extraordinary amount of trust in God’s love and grace. *God’s* love and grace.

You see, this season of self-examination, confession, and penitence—it’s not really about us at all. It’s not about gazing at our navels or dwelling moodily on our sin. It’s not about beating ourselves up for not being perfect.

No, it’s not about us at all. It’s about God. It’s about God’s mercy. It’s about God’s grace. It’s about God’s power to redeem. It’s about God’s invitation to relationship. It’s about God’s power to grow compassion and community and faith even out of our sinfulness. Amen.