

Lent III

The Ten Commandments (better the Ten Words) of God are given to us as words God spoke. We often hear prophets or Moses speaking in the first person divine, saying "I am" or "I will" and the "I" is God.

The voice is the prophets but the speaker is really God.

But these Ten Words are spoken to us as the Word of God and voice and speaker are God God's own self.

They are thus before us today with a particular power and authority today and always.

Exodus and Deuteronomy and Leviticus are full of other laws and rules, also remembered as revealed by God through Moses.

The following of them all would create a highly regulated, carefully lived life, Still to be seen among Orthodox Jews.

The Christian Church, however, early on, felt led by the Spirit to omit most of the laws in its moral teaching, given the powerful new thing God had done in Jesus Christ.

Yet these Ten Words, heard twice in our service today, have long endured with clear moral authority.

They stand on two pillars of authority.

The first is the simple authority of God.

"I am the Lord your God; you shall have none other gods but me."

This strong words of address signals that what follows rests on the assertion of divine identity and divine relationship that came before.

God says, I am God and here is my will for human life and human community.

Made in my image, entrusted with my creation,

Accept these words based on who I am to you.

This is of course, the same God, who said, "I am who I am."

I wonder how much natural inclination you fell to accept authority that is based in the identity of the one claiming it.

I can tell you that most leaders who expect to be followed because of their title find themselves strangely alone.

Yes, problems abound for modern people in accepting such authority.

It is the youngest member of my household who is the least likely to accepts such arguments, who is the mostly likely to ask why some people get to tell other people what to do.

Often that way in our human hierarchies; the people given the least power ask the hardest questions.

It is probably safe to say that things in our household are very unfair, by the perspective of that youngest member.

Children are asked to have reasons for any departure from the usual way of doing things.

Reasonable evidence needs to be offered if parental will is refused.

But the parents sometimes say things like, "Because I said so."

We don't think there is much need to hide parental authority; we have the car keys and all the money and do most of the work to make it all work.

And we have explained that "Because I said so," means, "because I have longer experience than you do and know this to be the better and safer course and because I sense the needs of the whole family and know it must be this way for us all to be well in the hours ahead."

And yet our youngest member is not satisfied.

Why don't parents need reasons?

Why do they have the car keys and the money?

Why were they born first and who made them the parents anyways?

We are who we are, we say.

If a seven year old thinks that way, many more of other ages do as well.

Authority proclaimed from on high isn't as effective as it once was. We may be pushing our luck at home.

The church would be full (the pews too) if asserting the divine will loudly:

God says come to church! God says do right!

Really motivated people.

There are still some among us who read Scripture with divine authority and who credit these words based on the identity of the speaker.

But for many, these are just one set of words and ideas, among many others.

And so a second pillar for their authority can also be located.

The 10 words have an authority that comes from their long use and obvious value.

We have generally found that a society and relationship based on these words works toward holiness.

It is good, generally, to love your parents, to rest from work, to be faithful to your spouse.

We live better when we do not desire another's good and are satisfied with our own.

When we tell the truth, when we preserve life.

I might even venture that if we created a set of ten basic commandments for personal, relational, and social holiness, we might come out with something like these.

That would be an interesting Sunday Forum; write your own Ten Commandments.

And then put them all together into a ten we could all agree on. I wonder if we could.

That would be the downside to these and all other forms of law.

They invite wrangling and there is the difficulty of applying them to the messiness of life.

Is it stealing for a man starving man to take a loaf of bread?

Must an abusive parent be honored?

Rabbis, canon lawyers, and regular attorneys make a living dealing with exceptions, peculiar cases, and the application of law to real life.

Seeing the regulations pile up, watching us argue, sensing the waning of divine authority,

Eventually God sent a beloved son into the world, who said:

You know what: Two commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Everything else comes from that. And then he took his love and divine authority to the Cross and made a great show of what loves, to change us all, forever.