



Lent 3 (B)

The Law

[RCL] Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

A few years ago, the abbreviation “SBNR” popped up in church and cultural circles, naming an emerging phenomenon showing up in countless national surveys. SBNR stands for Spiritual, But Not Religious. SBNRs are present in every cohort surveyed, but their prevalence increases with every new generation. Many church folk feel anxiety rise as they look at their beloved buildings, programs, and budgets in light of this turn away from organized religion.

But have you ever heard of someone who is religious, but not spiritual? RBNS? For those of us in the church world, it is easy to assume that if someone goes through the motions -- attending church, serving on committees, making an annual pledge – that surely, they must also be spiritual. What is the difference anyway between being religious and being spiritual? Have you ever thought about it?

Many would suggest that being religious has more to do with external things like institutional affiliation and assent to a set of beliefs, such as our Nicene Creed. Spirituality, on the other hand, is about *experiences* of self-transcendence, belonging, and connection: spirituality is about relationship.

Among all of our liturgical seasons, Lent may be the most focused on personal *experiences*. We aim to clear away debris that blocks loving connection with God and one another and open ourselves to encounters with the Divine through prayer and saturation in Scripture. Lenten “disciplines,” despite their stern-sounding name, are more about spirituality than religion. Self-examination and repentance (or “changing our hearts and minds” as the Common English Bible translates it); prayer, fasting, and self-denial; reading and meditating on God’s Word—all of these are pathways toward a relationship with the liberating, loving, and life-giving God and friendships with those on a similar pilgrimage.

But here in the middle of this 40-day spiritual pilgrimage, we are asked to wrestle with something that may conjure up images of religion at its worst: The Ten Commandments. Litigation about courthouse walls or monuments on public property; Roman Catholic kids scouring their consciences to have something to confess; neighbors’ yard signs displaying the two tablets, which can feel like a litmus test for whether or not “some people” are welcome; and, of course, the kind of easy self-righteousness that accompanies the selective enforcement or shaming associated with any of “God’s laws.”

But today's reading from Exodus presents us with an invitation—an invitation to reclaim the Ten Commandments not as a tool for judgment and shame but instead as a set of teachings that guide us into a life-giving spirituality. The teachings figuratively construct a space for those experiences we are made to long for: self-transcendence, belonging, and connection.

The Ten Teachings, or the “Ten Words” as rabbinic tradition refers to them, lay a foundation for spirituality to blossom out of religion, for encounter to emerge from rules, for transcendence to arise from tradition. These teachings provide a foundation for spirituality in at least three ways.

First, we realize that we worship a God whose desire for our wellbeing *transcends* our small-mindedness, resistance, and selfishness.

The very first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me.” But those words have a preface: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” This preface isn't optional; it is a necessary prologue that frames the intention of all that follows.

- The LORD who yearns for us to abide by the teachings is the same One who heard our cry in Egypt and is committed to liberating us from every kind of captivity.
- And this LORD has demonstrated power in real-time by intervening to rescue the oppressed. The LORD is the One who went to the mat for us against Pharaoh and all the pharaohs since the first one, be they the Babylonians, or the Herodians, the Roman Empire, or any political or economic system that seeks its own well-being to the detriment of others.
- The LORD is the One who provides for us, even when we resist that generosity, who made water spring from a rock, who provided manna and quail in the wilderness.

That is the One before whom we should have no other gods. The LORD is eager to *encounter* us and put our finitude and weakness in the eternal context of liberating love.

The second through fifth teachings, about

- not making or worshipping Gods other than the LORD,
- revering God's name and not using it in vain or in attempts to control God,
- resting with our creaturely and human neighbors on the Sabbath, just like God did after creating us, and
- honoring our parents, so that our days may be long in the land,

are all about *connection*. You can almost think of these teachings like an umbilical cord, tethering us to what nourishes us, energizing us so that we can discern and accomplish God's good purposes for our lives.

Our culture doesn't talk much about idols, but if we're honest, all of us can name things that compete for our ultimate allegiance, demand our attention, and suck up our resources: professional sports, alcohol,

social media, our investment accounts. These things aren't bad in and of themselves, but they easily take up more space in our lives than they ought, squeezing out our availability for caring for ourselves (souls and bodies) and our communities. It is as though we have a limited number of portals for connection, and if each of these takes up a port, where do we plug into that nourishing, life-giving flow of God's love?

The teaching about sabbath rest is an astounding gift for us if we can slow down enough to receive it. When we rest, we practice being in the Promised Land. We put our worries, fears, and anxieties in the metaphorical parking lot and are invited to trust that God will attend to them while we are simply "being," rather than fretting about. Can you imagine how friendships in your parish would deepen if you all "rested" together once a week? If you just spent time playing together, enjoying each other's company, telling stories, sharing food? The command to rest, at its best, is a command to enjoy, to focus on the enough-ness of what God has given you, the space to breathe, to receive that nourishment that God has prepared.

And thirdly, the final five teachings are all about *belonging*. Wouldn't it be impossible to feel a sense of belonging if you were always worried about staying physically safe, or someone stealing your cattle, or your car, or your social security number; seducing your spouse; lying about you; or viewing all your property with an acquisitive eye? Trust is the foundation for any sense of belonging. Brené Brown, the psychological researcher, talks about belonging as the ability to show up as your authentic self. If we don't experience a basic level of trust in a community, there is no way we'll ever feel safe enough to show up as we actually are, much less learn that we are worthy of belonging...as we actually are.

During Lent, many Episcopalians begin Sunday liturgies with the Litany of Penitence. The officiant recites each commandment, to which the people respond with a prayer for God's mercy, implying rightly that they have failed to abide perfectly by these commandments. But maybe the next time you hear them, you'll remember their deepest purpose isn't to induce guilt or serve as a litmus test for the true Christians; rather, they guide us into a genuine spirituality that God wants for us and with us: self-transcendence, connection, and belonging.

But maybe the Psalmist puts it better: the law of the LORD is more to be desired than much fine gold, more than much fine gold, sweeter far than honey, than honey in the comb."

Who doesn't want to taste that sweetness?

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