

A Sermon for Lent 3, Year B  
Exodus 20:1-17 (The Ten Commandments)  
Fr. Jim Cook

*Taking your faith seriously  
(and not just your religion).*

Earlier this week, when I realized that the Ten Commandments were part of this morning's readings, I went on something of a sentimental journey. It was only a couple of years ago that Judge Roy Moore was in the news. I'm sure you remember him: he's the former Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, and he fought a legal battle to keep a monument to the Ten Commandments on display at the Alabama Judicial Building. Judge Moore argued that it was important to acknowledge God as the source of the Ten Commandments and, therefore, the ultimate author of our system of laws.

In the end, Judge Moore lost his legal battle, and his job. And now, a couple of years later, I'm not sure he was fighting the right battle. Because, in the first chapter of his epistle, James wrote these words:

<sup>22</sup>Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. <sup>23</sup>For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup>For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. <sup>25</sup>But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Clearly, what Judge Moore was fighting for, was for people to be given the opportunity to acknowledge God's role in our legal system. On the surface, that sounds like a good plan, and maybe it is. But more important, in my mind, is so conforming your life and actions that they are congruent with the laws of God. Acknowledging God is one thing; obeying God (*i.e.*, being doers of the word) is quite another. And, as examples of how people can be hearers of the word and not necessarily doers, I cite the following:

Before former Enron chief Ken Lay appeared in federal court, to answer an eleven-count indictment for fraud, conspiracy and making false statements, he stopped by his church to pray. His pastor accompanied him when he turned himself in to authorities.

Also,

Before a federal jury convicted WorldCom chief Bernard Ebbers of fraud, he stood before his friends at his church and declared, I just want you to know you aren't going to church with a crook.

And,

Representative Tom DeLay, a self-proclaimed born-again Christian, had to resign his post as the House Majority Leader when he was indicted for money laundering.

And finally,

Dennis Rader was a leader in his Wichita parish community; he was the president of the parish council (probably the equivalent of our Senior Warden). But Rader is better known as the B. T. K. serial killer.

Clearly, knowing the laws of God, and perhaps even reciting them on a regular basis, is no predictor of a person's behavior. But how many Christians even know what God truly expects of us? How many Christians can even recite the Ten Commandments? Perhaps not as many as we might expect.

A few years ago, in a poll of over 1,500 adults, only a few of them were able to recite as many as three or four of the Ten Commandments. And the rationalization for their poor performance was a rather weak "who can possibly remember all of them?" That's a shame, because I think a knowledge of the Commandments is important to our life as the people of God. That's why, for example, the young people in our Youth Confirmation Class are being challenged to learn, among other things, the Ten Commandments.

But, as important as it is to be able to recite the Ten Commandments, something more is being demanded from each of us. Tom Ehrich, an Episcopal priest and writer, in an article that appeared in last Monday's (March 13, 2006) edition of USA Today, wrote this:

Our nation needs ethical and religious instruction in the basics: honesty, fidelity, humility, sharing wealth, sharing power, and sacrifice.

In other words, while it's one thing to be taught the Ten Commandments, it's another thing entirely to be taught how to *live* them. And living out the Ten Commandments is not something you learn everything about in Sunday school; it's something you learn about best at home, when you're a child. And it's something you continue to learn about throughout your life.

And so, maybe what we're seeing here, is a basic failure in the programs of the twenty-first century Christian churches: We're telling our parishioners what they need to know, but not so much on how to put that knowledge into practice. Too many churches are not challenging their people to take their faith seriously.

But one of the things that history has shown us, is that it's not a popular thing to challenge people to live out their faith. In that same article, Tom Ehrich also said:

Yet, in the typical congregation, it is safer to preach about someone else's sexual behavior than about wise and faithful use of money, or on economic dislocation, corporate ethics or widening gaps in the distribution of wealth. ... With rare exceptions, preachers of

all stripes seem to avoid what Jesus said about wealth and power. Instead, they preach about church politics, upcoming festivals and personal improvement.

Jesus certainly learned that lesson. He was rejected by so many in the religious establishment because he challenged people to take their faith seriously, and not just their religion, and the people of God have a long history of rejecting anyone who bids them to take their faith seriously. Because that's when you've gone from preachin' to meddlin'.

But maybe that's what the church needs to do: stop preachin' so much, and start meddlin' a bit more. Stop playing it safe, and start challenging people to be doers of the word, and not hearers only. To start taking seriously our mandate to love one another as Christ loved us, and to turn the other cheek, and go the extra mile, and be leaven, salt, and light. To be, in other words, Christ to this generation.

If we could actually get to that point, then it wouldn't matter whether or not a monument to the Ten Commandments is on display at the Alabama Judicial Building, because those very same Commandments would be written on our hearts, and practiced in our lives.

Maybe this is what Paul had in mind when he wrote these words:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind ...  
(Romans 12:2).

Being transformed, my friends, is what I think matters the most to God; Being a hearer of the word, *and* a doer of the word. And that, I believe, is how we can make the greatest impact in the world – by taking seriously our faith, and not just our religion.