



March 18, 2007  
Fourth Sunday in Lent

Ten Signposts to Freedom  
**IV. Honoring Boundaries**  
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I am continuing in a series of Lenten sermons focused on the Ten Commandments. You'll remember that these commandments were given to a people who had left slavery and were on their way to a Promised Land. Thus, the purpose of the commandments is to be signposts that guide us all to freedom. Today we come to the seventh and eighth commandments: "Thou shall not commit adultery. Thou shall not steal." And here we discover the wonderful irony that freedom is only found in places with boundaries and limitations.

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"Thou shall not." What are we to make of such a terse statement? There is no room for nuance or rationalization. How do we get around, "Thou shall not."? In a commencement address to the graduates of Duke University, Ted Koppel said, "Sometimes the answer is no. Not no because it isn't cool, or smart, or because you might end up in jail or on an AIDS ward - but no because it's wrong.... Our society finds such absolute truth too strong a medicine to digest undiluted. In its purest form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder; it is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai were not Ten Suggestions, they are Ten Commandments."

It was so long ago that Moses came down the mountain with these commands written in stone by the finger of God. Since that day, how many empires have risen and fallen? How many generations have come and gone? And how many frontiers has society crossed? But the absolute truth of the commands persevere. It was as if God had also written them on our hearts. "Thou shall not."

It is difficult for me to believe there are that many of us who think adultery and stealing are not wrong. If you are the type of person who breaks these commandments easily, the chances are good you are not the type who comes to church. We know it is wrong, but we still break the seventh and eighth commandments. In fact, we probably break both commandments more often than we think.

Those of us who have not actually committed the act of adultery are told by Jesus that we are just as guilty if we have lusted after someone. That pretty much includes all of us. Jesus was always worried most of all about the heart, from where all evil is born.

Those of us who do not think we are thieves, need to remember that stealing involves more than breaking into someone's house and taking a television. Isn't it also stealing when we take time that belongs to our children and give it to our work, or take money that belongs to God and spend it securing our own lives? Isn't it stealing when we take away someone's reputation with gossip, or when we take more than our share of the world's natural resources?

Well, now I think I have found a way of offending just about everyone today. I wanted to be fair. More to the point, I want to demonstrate Jesus' concern that none of us can sustain our pretensions to righteousness based on the law. According to Jesus, we've all broken these commandments.

Some of you are hoping today for a sermon full of strong conviction. Maybe you have been hurt by someone who did more than lust with their hearts. Or maybe you have had a job or a dream stolen from you. Somebody broke the rules, and it cost you. So you're hoping I will really give it to the adulterers and thieves today.

Others of you are sitting in church today with shame and secrets. You cannot believe what you have done - the vows you broke, or the things you cost others. You don't need more conviction. You're plenty convicted about your guilt as it is. In the words of David, "Your sin is ever before you." So you're hoping that somewhere there may be the same compassion that Jesus offered the woman caught in the act of adultery.

Well, the Gospel always comes to us with both compassion and conviction. "Neither do I condemn you," Jesus said to the woman. Compassion. "Go and sin no more," he concluded. Conviction. You only understand half of the gospel if you just cling to one of those words. Every parent understands this. How can we raise our children without giving them a balance of compassion and conviction? Should a child grow up with only one of these, he or she will be lost in life. And so will we as the children of God.

The spiritual landscape of Christianity is littered with churches that offer only half a gospel, which is really no gospel at all. It is easy to be a church that stands for nothing but compassion. Those congregations say, "Whatever you believe is just fine, as long as you are sincere." But they do not preach a lot on the Ten Commandments or even Jesus' interpretation of them. It is also easy to be a church that stands for every conviction except compassion. Those congregations make you feel better about yourself by judging others. "Look out for them. They're sinners," we're told. But they have to edit out the many texts that proclaim God's grace to the "them" that they worry about. But to be a church that finds its life in Christ means we have the more difficult challenge of holding conviction and compassion together.

Even the conviction of the Ten Commandments is actually filled with compassion. Remember these commandments are guides to freedom. They are like signposts that warn, "There's a cliff here. If you walk this way, you're going to fall far and hard." The point of such a sign is not to preoccupy you with the danger, or who has fallen, but to keep you focused in the way that you should go in life. That's why the law is actually a grace. Without that guide, we would never make it to true freedom.

A while ago I saw a dog who had broken his tether and wandered out onto a busy highway. Perhaps when the rope broke, the dog thought he was free. But as I watched him darting back and forth on the lanes of the road barking frantically at the cars that swerved to miss him, it did not look like freedom. It looked like fear. It was not until someone pulled over and dragged the terrified dog off the road that he was really free.

This brings us to that great irony of life - true freedom is always found within limitations. That's what the commandments tell us. We live within boundaries. We cannot take something just because we want it. This is a lesson that is as old as the Garden of Eden. Like Adam and Eve, we are all placed in a garden that God has called *good*. There is so much fruit of the garden that we can freely take, and so many blessings within it that we can enjoy. But there is always something in the midst of every garden that is forbidden. We can see it. We cannot even avoid it, but it is beyond our limits because it is not ours for the taking. That's the very thing we want the most. We lose interest in the rest of the garden: "Let it go to weed. What am I going to do about this that I do not have?" But it is in reaching for forbidden fruit that we lose the garden we had. And it is then that we realize the garden we had was paradise. Only now it is paradise lost.

This doesn't mean that we cannot make changes in our life. It means we cannot assume that the whole world is ours for the taking. And it means we need to stop thinking about taking, and start thinking

about receiving. The positive way to say, “Thou shall not commit adultery or steal,” is to find joy in what God is giving you.

There is something that is always behind our temptation to break the tether of the commandments. That is the quest for happiness. Since we think happiness is not something we receive but something that comes from a quest, we are blind to the blessings we have and obsessed with taking what we can. We say that we were just desperate for love or we were just angry that someone had more than we, and when we saw the fruit that looked pleasing, we took it. But happiness is never found in things you take, whether it’s the intimacy that does not belong to you or things and time you take from others. If you start out on the quest for happiness, you’ll just keep consuming your whole life. And that next thing or person will always be the idol that vainly promises happiness, which is a way of stealing your soul from God.

The question is not, “Will others miss the things you are taking from them?” The question is, “What will it make of your soul if you become a taker?”

My purpose today has not been just to wag my finger and shout at you, “Thou shall not!” My purpose has been to say look out for the cliff along the way. Don’t run off it chasing happiness. Come back to the joy of receiving a life God is giving you, and see that even the limitations are blessings. And if you have recently fallen off a cliff somewhere along the way, then you have to know that salvation is always waiting. You cannot fall so deep that the Savior cannot find you and lift you up.

“Neither do I condemn you,” says the Lord, “Go, and sin no more.”

Benediction. *Thou shall not. Those words are so full of conviction, and among the most compassionate of all the Bible. Amen.*