

October 10, 2021
Lectionary 28, Year B
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 10:17-31
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Impossible

I once knew a man who had kept all of the commandments. At least he said that he had.

We were in a class on the Small Catechism, and I started the class by talking with the group about the order in which things appeared in the Small Catechism.

Those of you who were Confirmed in a Lutheran Church might remember some of this, but in case you weren't Confirmed in a Lutheran Church, or in case you've forgotten, I'll review.

The order in which things appear in the Small Catechism was an intentional choice made by Martin Luther. It starts with the Ten Commandments. The commandments are followed by the Apostles' Creed, and the Apostles' Creed is followed by the Lord's Prayer. Then Luther describes the two sacraments that are found in the Lutheran church, Baptism and Holy Communion. After that there are outlines of prayers that can be used in the home and at the table, and some bible passages that are related to how people should conduct themselves in society, and then a marriage service and a baptism service.

Now I'm going to read you a quote from the introduction of the version of the Small Catechism that I use with the Confirmation students, and edition of the Small Catechism that was produced for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. This is what it says:

In [Luther's] 1522 *Personal Prayer Book* Martin Luther reflected on the order in which he had put things in the Small Catechism and said it was like what a

sick person experiences when a physician begins with the diagnosis (the Ten Commandments) and then offers the prescribed treatment (the good news of God's grace in the Apostles' Creed), after which the sick person asks that the prescription for grace be filled (by God in the petitions of the Lord's prayer). The point of the Small Catechism is to give us comfort and support when we face problems in our Christian life (Luther's Small Catechism, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, MA. 2016. 9).

That was what I was explaining to the room of about ten adults who had come to a six-week evening class on the Small Catechism at my old church.

We had started at the beginning of the catechism and I was explaining that the catechism began with the Ten Commandments and Luther's explanations of each commandment so that this encounter with God's law and the realization that we had fallen short of keeping the spirit of God's law would drive us to the grace that we find in the description of God's activity for us in the Apostles' Creed.

I knew barely fifteen minutes into the class that it was not going to go well, because that was the point at which the man I have been talking about jumped in and said, "Why would the Ten Commandments persuade me that I need God's grace? I've kept all of the Commandments."

Keep in mind, we were still talking about the introduction of the Small Catechism in this class, but I invited the class to take a look at Ten Commandments to see if any of them could truly look at the commandments and Martin Luther's explanations of them and come to the conclusion that they had indeed kept both the letter and the life-giving spirit of the commandments.

I knew the man who had kept the commandments pretty well. We had many long discussions about his life, his past, his struggles, and the peace and joy that he found in his life as he was, at that point, living it. I can tell you, that he had not kept the commandments, kept all of the commandments, in letter or in spirit.

Saying that he had not kept the commandments is not intended to be an indictment or criticism of this man. In fact, there were many things that I liked and appreciated about this man, not least of which was his honesty with me over the years.

Also, according to my own theology, which has been shaped by a Lutheran understanding of God's righteousness and a Lutheran understanding of human nature, to say that someone has not kept all of the commandments is not a particular or unique commentary on any individual. "Hey, you see that guy over there? He hasn't kept all of the commandments."

Instead, I would say of the man in my Small Catechism class the same thing that I would say of myself. He had not and I have not kept all of the commandments.

Some of my actions might look upright, but not all of them, and my heart often isn't pure, even if my actions are restrained.

I have not kept all of the Commandments, and I'm well aware of it for myself. So, I'm not just being particularly hard on this guy when I say that he hadn't kept all of the commandments, or at least no harder than I would be on anyone else, including myself.

For me, as a Lutheran pastor, it was a much more shocking, much more offensive thing to hear someone, especially someone I knew well enough to know based on actual evidence and not just a knowledge of human nature, that it wasn't true, say that he could stand upright in the face of the searching light of the Ten Commandments.

This is something that I would be more likely to say: "Hey, you see that guy over there? He says that he has kept all of the commandments."

So, we reviewed the commandments and Luther's explanations of them a week before we were supposed to, because I thought that if we did that, he would see himself in need of grace.

That was the point of the whole exercise. That is the point of the Small Catechism. Reading it is supposed to be a joyful thing, in which we find ourselves in need of grace at the beginning and find that grace extended to us throughout the rest of the book.

But, for this guy, it didn't work.

Here's an example of one of the commandments and Luther's explanation of it:

The Eighth Commandment

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

What does this mean?

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light (Luther's Small Catechism, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, MA. 2016. 22).

I asked the man if he had ever spoken poorly of someone, a neighbor, a coworker, an ex-wife, a former friend. He said that he had never gone to court and lied about someone and that's what the commandment said that he was not supposed to do.

According to the most literal reading of each commandment he had kept them and he didn't see why some guy named Martin Luther got to tell him that the commandment meant more than it said that it did in the Bible.

At this point, Britton jumped in and mentioned that this kind of scriptural interpretation had been going on for centuries, ever since the Bible had been written down, and that Jesus himself, as a Jewish rabbi, or teacher, had participated in it,

by interpreting or commenting on the commandments and the other laws in the Old Testament law codes.

The man in the class conceded that maybe Jesus had the right to interpret the commandments, but that was it.

The reality was that Martin Luther's explanations of the Ten Commandments, that moved them out of the realm only of what we should not do and into the realm of what we should do to influence our neighbors and communities, in terms of honoring God, keeping promises, preserving life, and protecting people's property and relationships, were making this man squirm and he wanted to justify himself.

He wanted to stand on his own two feet before God. He had a common human desire to earn his place in the kingdom, to say that he had pulled himself up by his own bootstraps. There was going to be no participation trophy for him. He would be given his place in the heavenly kingdom because he had achieved it.

He was uncomfortable with the concept that he was a sinner, because he was uncomfortable with the idea of grace. And at least he was honest about that. Grace is an uncomfortable idea for sure.

Now, I don't want you to think that the man who, admittedly, gave me a pretty hard time during this one class, and some of my other classes as well, was a bad guy.

After I preached this sermon at the Zoom service, I said to myself, "Maybe I should change the commandment we look at when I preach it at the in-person service, because I don't want it to sound like I'm bearing false witness against this man, and I certainly don't want actually to be bearing false witness against him."

I decided not to change it, but I do need to say this man does not deserve your bad opinion. He was a challenging, but interesting guy, who truly was seeking to be in relationship with God and with the church. His questions made me think deeply about faith, I'm a better pastor because of him, and we always, including

during and after this class, had a good relationship. I missed him greatly when he moved away from Connecticut while I was still at Prince of Peace.

I wonder if I would feel the same way about the only other person that I know who has said, in a way, to my face, although over the span of time of about 2000 years, that he has kept all of the commandments.

That person was the man who approached Jesus as Jesus was getting ready to leave the town where he was staying.

I wonder what prompted him to ask Jesus his big question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

I think that maybe Jesus wondered why he was asking this question too.

There are a couple of ways to look at it. He was either asking because he was honestly concerned about his eternal fate, his eternal well-being and he honestly wanted to hear from this well-known rabbi, who had such a reputation as a teacher and a healer, how he could achieve eternal life, or he was asking because he felt that he had already achieved eternal life, by his commandment keeping life, and he wanted to hear the teacher say so, and say so publicly.

After all, Jesus was getting ready to set out on a journey. When I picture this scene, I picture Jesus surrounded by people, townspeople, and perhaps the people who had hosted him in Judea, and his disciples, with people saying goodbye, seeking to touch him, seeking his blessing, asking him for one more healing, for one more moment, for one more word of wisdom when the man came up, parting through the crowd to kneel at the teacher’s feet and ask him his burning question.

If he was hoping that Jesus would say that he had achieved eternal life, through his good behavior, then he was, of course, disappointed.

Jesus reminded him of the commandments, and the man boldly, though probably sincerely, said, “Teacher, I have kept all of these since my youth” (Mark 10:20).

Maybe he was thinking, “So, what else does God require of me.” Maybe he

was thinking, “Pronounce me righteous in front of all of these people, my neighbors, so that they will know what a fine and upstanding man they have in their midst.”

But whichever he was thinking, Jesus’ next words clearly came as a surprise to him. Jesus looked at him and loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21).

This was not what the man was expecting to hear.

Maybe he was expecting to be celebrated because of his obedience. Maybe he was expecting to be given just one more small and easy task to complete on his way to earning his place in the kingdom.

But instead, the gospel reading says that he went away shocked and grieving, because he had many possessions (Mark 10:22).

We don’t know what he did next. We don’t know how his story continued.

We don’t know if he went away grieving because he knew that he couldn’t, that he wouldn’t do what Jesus had asked of him or if he went away grieving because he was tallying up in his head, how much he had to lose; what his life would look like without the possessions that gave him a comfortable life in the world and that gave him status and power in his community.

What we do know is that Jesus recognized the power that our possessions have over us. How hard it is for us to let them go. How easy it is for us to make our things our God, and how quickly they start to possess us, claiming our time, drowning our generosity, causing us to build bigger fences and bigger barns, to make sure that what we value most, what we believe will keep us safe in a challenging world, is protected.

This is stewardship time in our church, the time when we ask people to make a financial commitment to Emmanuel that will help sustain us and our ministries in the coming year.

People's financial commitments to our church make it possible for us to pay our staff and maintain our building and keep the lights and heat on, and buy snacks for the youth group, and Sunday School materials for the kids, and send kids to the National Youth Gathering and print bulletins, and do all of the other things that we do as a community of faith, to worship and praise, God, and to share God's love with others.

Stewardship time is a time when we ask people, ask you, as members and friends of Emmanuel, to give up some of your possessions, to help us to support and maintain, and even grow our ministry to each other, to our neighbors, and to the world.

So, it would seem like this text would be a great text for me to hold up in front of you right now.

It would seem like a great time for me to say, "See, Jesus wants you to give generously, to give up what you have, so that you make it into God's eternal kingdom."

The subtext of that could be, "Please make sure you make a big pledge!"

Unfortunately, for our Stewardship campaign, I can't use this gospel for pledge drive. I can't say that based on this gospel reading.

Because what Jesus tells us in this reading, recognizing the way that our possessions can strangle us, cripple us; how it can be impossible for us to let them go, gives us hope that what we are not able to do ourselves, God can do for us.

God can make the impossible possible. God can and does loosen our bonds. God can and does set us free. God can save us, even though we cannot save ourselves.

Of course, it does matter what we do with our possessions. It does matter how we live, and how we love and serve our neighbors, with all that we have and all that we are.

But our salvation comes not because we have convinced ourselves of our own righteousness before God, not because we have convinced ourselves that we have kept the commandments.

Our salvation is a gift of grace. It comes through God, who makes impossible things possible, and who, in Jesus Christ looks at us, and loves us. Thanks be to God. Amen.