

May 14, 2023
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
Year A
John 14:15-21
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Keeping Which Commandments?

As we have been wrapping up our Confirmation class, in preparation for Confirmation Sunday, which is on Pentecost, two weeks from today, I have asked the boys in the class the same question to begin our lessons for the past two weeks. I've asked them, "What does it mean to be a Christian?"

I'm really regretting not taking a picture of what I wrote on the board to capture the answers that they gave me. Because I didn't think to do that, I won't be able to share in this sermon everything that they told me, but I do remember a lot of it. They actually displayed a lot of insight in their answers, stating that being a Christian means:

- Believing in the Triune God
- Believing in the Apostles' Creed
- Participating in the sacraments
- Participating in the Christian community
- Helping others
- Following the way of Jesus
- and praying.

Their list was gratifying to me, as it reflected that they had learned a lot about being a Christian from their families, in church, in Sunday School, and in our Confirmation class.

One of the things that struck me about how they made this list was how they started it. Both weeks that I asked this question, “What does it mean to be a Christian?” the same thing was one of their first or second answers. It was “keeping the Ten Commandments.” Or at least, trying to keep the Ten Commandments, which led them to identify another feature of being a Christian, confessing and forgiving.

One of the questions that was asked frequently in our Confirmation class was whether or not the Ten Commandments were all weighted the same way. For example, they asked, was taking the Lord’s name in vain weighted the same way as killing someone? Would God condemn us equally for saying “Oh my God” and for murder? Would the punishment be the same for speaking disrespectfully to one’s parents as it would for stealing something?

In other words, if something was socially acceptable or developmentally predictable, did it carry the same weight in the eyes of the Almighty as those things for which we could be punished in the secular world, socially or criminally, things like murder, stealing, adultery, perjury?

Was it as bad to want your neighbor’s cool new gaming system as it was to actually steal your neighbor’s cool new gaming system?

All of these are really good questions. But, in some ways, they boil down to the same thing. In the kids’ minds, I think the question boiled down to “Is God just?”, because, and understandably, in their minds, and perhaps in ours as well, to have the same consequences meted out for not

going to worship on a Sunday and cheating our spouse, does not make a lot of sense.

The way I heard the question, though, was. “How much can we get away with?”

“Where is the line, really, the line I can’t cross without facing some unpleasant consequences?”

These past couple of Confirmation classes have been tough ones for me, because I’ve been torn between two important things. Of course, I don’t want any Confirmation student coming out of my Confirmation class thinking is that the Ten Commandments don’t matter. But I also don’t want them to come out of my Confirmation class thinking that their salvation is based on how well they can adhere to a set of rules. That doesn’t sound very Lutheran, does it? Spending time trying to figure out the logistics of the Commandments, how they are weighted, how the justice of God or perhaps in the kids’ minds, the lack thereof, plays out in their lives, is not really the most important thing that they should be focusing on. Because, of course, none of those questions are good Lutheran questions. Our salvation is not based on our ability to follow a set of rules, even really and well-known important rules, like the Ten Commandments.

The reason the Ten Commandments matter, is because, when lived fully, they lead us to a healthy relationship with God and with our neighbor. They help us to know our life-giving God better. They lead us to honor the holiness of God and the reflection of the holiness of God found in other humans and in creation.

But I certainly, “Keep the Ten Commandments **or else**,” was not the message that I wanted my Confirmation class to leave class with.

Which is why I was truly comforted by a conversation that I had with one of the Confirmations students. It didn't start in a great place with the student asking me if I thought it was fair for God to throw us into hell unless we towed the line and followed God's rules. I asked him if he really thought that that was why Christians followed Jesus, because we were afraid that God would punish us.

He said, "Well, historically, that's why Christians have followed God's rules."

I said, "Okay, maybe that's been true for some Christians."

He said, "Most Christians."

I said, "Maybe."

But, I asked, "Is that why you've been taught to follow God and try to live out Christian faith and Jesus' teachings in your life?"

"No." he conceded.

"So," I asked, "Why do we still follow God and try to live God's teachings in our lives?"

He said, "Because God loves us."

"Okay," I said, "I think that you're getting somewhere. Why does God love motivate us to live God's teachings?"

"Because God's teachings are about love and if we are loved by God, we should show other people how it feels to be loved," he said.

I promise that I am not taking the Lord's name in vain but am truly uttering a prayer of thanks when I say, "Oh thank God," that a child who has spent two years in my Confirmation class could muster up that answer.

We have two more Confirmation classes left this year, and one of them is a Confirmation rehearsal, so it's unlikely that we will spend a lot

more time grappling with the commandments, at least until next year. Imagine the relief I felt, knowing that I wouldn't have to theologically discuss or debate the Ten Commandments again at least until the fall. Then I looked at today's gospel reading and found these words:

Jesus said to the disciples "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15)

Do those words mean that I have to spend a sermon grappling, yet again, for the third time in three weeks, with the place of the Ten Commandments in the lives of the Christian? Or is it possible that they mean something else?

I've had a very, very, very busy week this week. In addition to being very busy, it's also been an unexpectedly aggravating week, one where even the things that I was looking forward to didn't work out quite the way that I expected. So, what should one do during a busy and stressful week? Re-read the gospel of John, looking for an answer to the question, "What are Jesus' commands?"

Of course, Jesus is God, part of the Holy Trinity, so the commandments in the rest of the Bible are also Jesus' commandments, including the Ten Commandments, but in the context of the gospel of John, I was curious about whether those Old Testament commandments were what Jesus was talking about, or if he was talking about something closer to home. What would it look like, I wondered, for us, who call ourselves Christians and who believe that we are called to follow Jesus' commandments, if we looked at what Jesus' commands are in the gospel of John exclusively?

Some of Jesus' commands in the gospel of John are addressed to individuals. They are:

- John 4:7 'Give me a drink'.
- John 5:8 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.'
- John 5:14 'Do not sin any more...'
- John 9:7a 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam'
- John 11:43b 'Lazarus, come out!'
- John 12:7 'Leave her alone.'

The commands of Jesus that are addressed to individuals are spoken in the context of healing and community building, spoken to the Samaritan woman at the well, spoken in defense of Mary as she anointed his feet, spoken when healing the blind man, and when calling Lazarus forth, from death to life.

Other commands in the gospel of John are addressed to groups, addressed to disciples and others. The commands that fall into those categories are:

- John 6:27a Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.
- John 7:37b-38a 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, ³⁸and let the one who believes in me drink.'

- John 8:7b ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’
- John 11:39a ‘Take away the stone.’
- John 11:44b ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’
- John 13:14-15 ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.
- John 13:34 Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

The commands of Jesus in the gospel of John that are addressed to groups fall into the categories, of faith building and belief, community building, healing, and loving.

It’s possible that when Jesus talked about keeping his commandments in today’s gospel reading, he was talking about the full scope of commandments in the Bible. It’s also possible that he was talking more specifically, during his last night with his disciples, about the commands that he had given them and others during his time with them as it is described in the gospel of John. Commands to believe, commands not to judge,

commands to heal and to free and to love. It's also possible that he was talking even more specifically about the commands that he had given them during that last meal, that last evening, which were these commands,

- John 13:14-15 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.
- John 13:34 Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

Those are how Jesus' commands in the gospel of John are distilled in Jesus' final words to his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. They are told that they are to love and serve each other.

If we work our way backward through the gospel of John and deeper back in the Bible and the story of God's working with God's people, it's possible that we can find, underneath all of the minutiae of the law, the same thing, the thing that, once again, "Thanks be to God," the Confirmation student figured out through all of the teenage deep desire for justice and for a world that makes sense. That we love God, and love others, because God first loved us.

We are called, as human beings who say that we are followers of Jesus, to love God, to love others, and to love God's creation.

And human history, our own stories, our own scriptures, tell us one other thing is true. We're going to need some help.

The Bible would be an awfully short book if we were good at this loving and serving thing; if we were good at following God's commandments, if our love for God were well reflected in our love for others.

The good news of today's gospel reading, and the good news of our faith, is not that Jesus tells us to keep his commandments, for the commandments to love and serve, while they give us lots of flexibility and room for creativity, are pretty broad and complicated in their scope. Hearing that we need to get on it alone doesn't sound like very good news to me. But instead of hearing instead we heard that we are not left alone to keep any of Jesus' commandments.

God does not set us an impossible task, a task that we have proven time and time again is beyond us, a task that we have to accomplish by ourselves while God sits back and judges our performance.

Instead, God is with us, moment by moment, day by day, God is with us, a gift of presence in the Holy Spirit, as the Advocate, who abides with us in love, as the Spirit of Truth who guides us for the healing of the world, and as the Comforter who assures us of God's unending love.

Jesus has blessed with commandments to love and serve. Jesus has placed us into community, so that we can build each other up and encourage each other as we seek to keep those commandments together, and in resurrected life and by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is with us showing us by his example, what it means to love, what it means to serve, what it means to keep his commandments. Amen.