

Lent 3 / B

*The Sweetness of God's Law*

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

7 March 2021



A few years ago, the abbreviation “*SBNR*” popped up in church circles, naming an emerging and expanding phenomenon showing up in national surveys. “*SBNR*” stands for “*Spiritual, But Not Religious*.” While the code may be new, *SBNRs* are certainly not new; they have been present in every faith survey taken over the past several decades, and their prevalence seemingly increases with every new generation. And many church folk feel anxiety rise as they look at their beloved parish buildings, programs, and budgets in light of this increasing turn away from organized religion.

“*SBNR*” - “*Spiritual, But Not Religious*.” But have you ever heard or known of someone who is religious, but not spiritual – “*RBNS*,” if you will? For those of us in the church world, it is easy to assume that if someone goes through all the motions -- attending church, serving on committees, participating in outreach and education opportunities, making an annual pledge – then surely, isn’t that proof enough that they must be spiritual? And just what exactly is the difference between being “religious” and being “spiritual”? Can you really even separate the two?

Some researchers who study such things will suggest that being religious has more to do with things like institutional and denominational affiliation, and adherence to a traditional set of beliefs, such as the Nicene Creed. Spirituality, on the other hand, is more about experiences of self-transcendence, belonging, and connection: more about relationship. It can be said that religion, then, is more “external,” while spirituality is more “internal.”

Among all of the Church's liturgical seasons, Lent may be the most focused on the spiritual – the internal, personal experiences of our faith. Over the course of these 40 days, we are encouraged to clear away the debris that blocks a loving connection with God and with one another, to open ourselves to encounters with the Divine through attention to prayer and saturation in Scripture. Lenten “disciplines,” despite their stern-sounding name, are certainly 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 our liberating, loving, and life-giving God, as well as affiliation and friendships with those on a similar pilgrim path. For all these reasons, we can say that Lent is more focused on spirituality than religion.

But this morning, on this Third Sunday in Lent, here in the middle of this annual 40-day spiritual pilgrimage, we are asked to wrestle with something that may – for many among us - conjure up images of religion at its worst: The Ten Commandments. Mention the Ten Commandments and what may come to mind – other than wracking one's brain trying to remember all ten! – may be litigation over courthouse walls or monuments on public property; Roman Catholic first-graders scouring their memories and consciences to come up with something to confess before making their First Communion; signs in front of churches displaying the two tablets, which can feel less like a faith statement and more like a litmus test for whether or not “some people” are welcome – you know, “those people”; 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 can serve to guide us into a life-giving spirituality. These teachings from the Exodus story construct a space for those experiences we all deeply long for: self-transcendence, belonging, and connection.

The Ten Teachings, or the “Ten Words” as Jewish rabbinic tradition refers to them, lay the foundation for spirituality to blossom out of religion, for encounter to emerge from rules, for transcendence to arise from tradition.

These ancient teachings provide a solid foundation for our spiritual life and health in at least three ways.

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

The very first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me.” But those words come with a preface, an introduction: “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 these teachings is the same One who first heard our cry of oppressive slavery in Egypt and still remains committed to liberating us from every kind of captivity.
- 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 that first one, be they the Babylonians, or the Herodians, the Roman Empire, or any other political or economic system, down to our own day, that seeks its own existence and well-being to the detriment of all God’s children.
- And the LORD is the One who always provides for us, even when we resist that generosity. He is the One who accompanies us on the journey, however arduous and long; the One who makes water spring from a rock in the arid desert to quench our thirst; the One who provides manna and quail in the wilderness to feed and sustain us.

This is the One before whom we should have no other gods. This is the LORD who longs to encounter us, to travel with us, to embrace our finitude and weakness within the eternal context of his liberating love and mercy, grace and justice.

The second through fifth teachings – the commandments about:

- not making or worshipping idols and 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 ...

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

Our 21<sup>st</sup>-century American culture doesn't talk much about the making and worship of 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, success and esteem, our investment accounts. These things aren't bad in and of themselves, but they can – and often do - easily take up more space in our lives than they ought, squeezing out our availability for caring for ourselves, caring for our families and friends, our neighbors, and our communities. It is as though we have a limited number of portals for connection, and if each of these other allegiances takes up a port, where can 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 will only slow down enough to receive it. When we rest, we practice being in the Kingdom of God; we experience what it will be like to finally reach the Promised Land. We set aside our worries, fears, and anxieties for a time. We can trust that God will attend to them while we are simply “being” - being with God, being with ourselves, being with loved ones. Can you imagine how affection and understanding and love between family and friends would deepen if we all just “rested” together once a week? If we just spent time playing together, enjoying each other's company, telling stories, sharing food? The command to rest is, at its best, a command to enjoy, to focus on the wholeness, the complete-ness, the enough-ness of what God has given you, to clear a space to breathe deeply, to receive that nourishment that God has prepared for you alone.

And thirdly, the final five teachings are all about belonging. Isn't it impossible to feel a sense of belonging if we are always worried about staying physically safe; always anxious about someone stealing our cattle, or our car, or our social security number; seducing our spouse; spreading lies about us; or viewing all our 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 relationship, in a family, in a community, there is no way we'll ever feel safe enough to show up just as we really are, much less learn that we are worthy of belonging . . . just as we really are.

During Lent, many Episcopal churches begin the Sunday liturgy as we did this morning, with the Decalogue, a recitation of the Ten Commandments. The officiant reads each commandment, to which the congregation responds with a prayer for God's mercy, acknowledging that we have failed to fully abide by each of these commandments. But, hopefully the next time you hear the Ten Commandments, perhaps you can remember that, while you have not followed them perfectly, their deepest purpose is not to induce guilt or serve as a litmus test for "true" Christians; rather, they are an invitation and a guide into a genuine spirituality that God wants for us and with us: self-transcendence, connection, and belonging.

In the end, the ancient Psalmist probably puts it better – and more succinctly! - than I have:

“the law of the LORD is more to be desired than much fine gold,  
more than much fine gold, \*  
sweeter far than honey, (sweeter) than honey in the comb.”

Who doesn't want to taste that sweetness?

Amen.