

Preaching the Ten Commandments

Colleagues,

This time I'm asking you to write ThTh 586, namely, to compose a response to this announcement just published in the parish newsletter by an ELCA pastor here in St. Louis. If your prose is not too incendiary, I'll send it on to the pastor. Seems to me that it's clear: he needs help. So does that congregation. The ELCA kerfuffle at the recent national assembly is minor compared to what's likely to be proclaimed as Christ's message to these parishioners. What help can you offer? To wit, something more in synch with Christ's

Peace and Joy.

Ed Schroeder

The Ten Commandments

"Anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scriptures."

—Martin Luther, The Large Catechism

Even for Martin Luther, that's a very large claim. But I believe it is true. Everything depends on how one defines "to know." Luther isn't referring to mere intellectual consent but rather to a radical reordering of life and how it is lived in community. In the commandments we find a God who addresses us where we live, where we face real issues about property, sex, and speech. To "know" these commandments is to know God and his will for our lives as it is lived out in the world.

The commandments are not guidelines for humanity in general. They are a countercultural way of life for those who know who

they are and to whom they belong. Their function is not to keep society running smoothly, but rather to produce a people who are, in our daily lives, a signal that God is at work in the world. We have the Ten Commandments because, just like the ancient Israelites, we have been set free from slavery to, as Luther put it, "sin, death, and the devil." The commandments are not a punitive lists of "dos" and "don'ts" but a gracious reminder of who we are and who we ought to be as God's chosen people. That's why Luther could say to "know" the Ten Commandments is to know everything the Bible is about.

Beginning Sunday, September 13 we will begin a new sermon series at both services exploring the Ten Commandments and their implications for living the Christian life today. Jesus said to be his disciple one must keep God's commandments (John 14:21). I invite you to join us this September in worship as we examine the life of discipleship viewed through the lens of the Ten Commandments.

Peace, Pastor X

Dear Pastor X,

Greetings from a fellow preacher in the St. Louis area. Due, I suspect, to the will of the Holy Spirit, your recent parish newsletter article about a series of sermons based on the Ten Commandments has come to my attention (as well as the attention of others whose number is unknown to me). I beg your patience to receive some feedback from me on your proposal. In the interests of full disclosure, I am NOT a fellow pastor. I am a PMA (Parish Ministry Associate) certified to preach and lead worship within the Central States Synod, and have averaged once a month at St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Poplar Bluff for all but a year and a half since October of 2001. I have also filled in elsewhere from

time to time.

The Ten Commandments is, you have to admit, an interesting choice for a sermon series. I can tell from your article that you find it an interesting (dare I say challenging) choice yourself. On the other hand, I can see why Luther's exhortation to preach the Ten Commandments is so compelling. It certainly was compelling to him.

When I studied the Lutheran Confessions under Professor Robert Bertram, I found Luther's explanation of the Ten Commandments difficult to deal with in a straightforward way. I can understand the desire to find a different way of hearing what he is saying, because when I heard it the first time, I wanted to thank brother Martin (sarcastically) for making me realize just how much I hate the Ten Commandments. And I don't want to hate the Ten Commandments. Did you fight the same impulse the first time you read it? Forgive me if I'm presuming too much, but are you still fighting that impulse today? I know I constantly fight it myself. I would suggest to you that this is the experience of all sinners. And yet, Brother Martin wants us to know the Ten Commandments – and I agree that mere intellectual consent is not the right meaning of “to know”.

Where I beg to differ with you is in your attempt to define what “to know” means: “a radical reordering of life and how it is lived in community.” That is a perfectly logical step to take. Indeed, it seems like that's what it must mean. After all, Brother Martin does such a decisive job of selling the goodness and holiness of the Ten Commandments, coming from the most divine of sources, God.

Indeed, in the conclusion of his explanation of the Ten Commandments, he describes them (from the Bente and Dau translation, CPH, 1921), as “a compend of divine doctrine, as to

what we are to do in order that our whole life may be pleasing to God, and the true fountain and channel from and in which everything must arise and flow that is to be a good work, so that outside of the Ten Commandments no work or thing can be good or pleasing to God, however great or precious it be in the eyes of the world." Sure sounds like "a radical reordering of life and how it is lived in community" to me. Certainly, "to 'know' the commandments is to know God and his will for our lives as it is lived out in the world" as you say.

When you say, "The commandments are not guidelines for humanity in general. They are a countercultural way of life for those who know who they are and to whom they belong. Their function is not to keep society running smoothly, but rather to produce a people who are, in our daily lives, a signal that God is at work in the world" you begin to lose me. I feel tempted to make a distinction between the law God intends for the world and the law God intends for his believers, which contradicts my understanding that the laws of the world I live in are partly rooted in the Ten Commandments, as well as other ancient laws. Assuming I am not imagining things when I remember it that way, that also makes me question your assertion that "their function is not to keep society running smoothly." Luther says the opposite. The world's legal sanction against murder (derived from the commandment), for example, makes a positive contribution toward the goal of a smooth running society. That may not be their only function, but that is a function of the Ten Commandments.

When you say, "We have the Ten Commandments because, just like the ancient Israelites, we have been set free from slavery to, as Luther put it, 'sin, death, and the devil.'" I find myself jumping off your bandwagon completely. At a bare minimum, one or more logical and very important steps have been left out of this reasoning. I refer you to the same conclusion I quoted from

earlier: "And the miserable blind people" "who dare to invent a higher and better life and estate than the Ten Commandments" "do not see that no man can get so far as to keep one of the Ten Commandments as it should be kept, but both the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer must come to our aid (as we shall hear), by which that [power and strength to keep the commandments] is sought and prayed for and received continually. Therefore all their boasting amounts to as much as if I boasted and said: To be sure, I have not a penny to make payment with, but I confidently undertake to pay ten florins."

Not only that, I remember his explanation for the First Article of the Creed (which comes next in the Large Catechism) made me feel even more angry, ending as it does by enumerating to my exasperation every last duty I owe to my Creator – truly a burden too heavy for me to bear. To paraphrase my teacher, Doctor Bertram, every day I accumulate new debt: new blessings I am duty bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey God for. I'm still working on the debt I accumulated 30 years ago. Like spiraling credit card debt, it keeps multiplying and I keep getting deeper and deeper in debt. To say either by way of omission or by way of shorthand, "We have the Ten Commandments because, just like the ancient Israelites, we have been set free from slavery to, as Luther put it, 'sin, death, and the devil.'" lays, with all due respect, a shallow foundation for a sermon worthy of the name Christian. And surely you do not mean to say that "the commandments are not a punitive list of 'dos' and 'don'ts.'" All your parishioners have to do is actually read them for themselves and I would expect them to demand an explanation from you for how you can say that. A child of 7 knows they are a punitive list of "dos" and "don'ts".

Fellow preacher of the Gospel of Christ, the Ten Commandments taken seriously are precisely part of the mechanism that enslaves us to, as Luther put it, "sin, death, and the devil."

Doesn't Paul teach precisely this object lesson in his epistle to the Romans? When he says that prior to the law there was no sin, but when the law came in, sin multiplied in his life, is he not speaking the truth as you and your parishioners know it, deep down inside? From my experience I would assert to you that this is absolutely the way the law works in my life as a sinner, and I sincerely doubt that I am unusual in that regard.

Furthermore, what sets us free from slavery to sin, death, and the devil, is expressed not in the Ten Commandments, but in the Creed, especially in the 2nd Article. Indeed, in Luther's explanation of the 2nd Article of the Creed, he spills the beans on what he's really doing in this Catechism of his: "For when we had been created by God the Father, and had received from Him all manner of good, the devil came and led us into disobedience, sin, death, and all evil, so that we fell under his wrath and displeasure and were doomed to eternal damnation, as we had merited and deserved. THERE WAS NO COUNSEL, HELP, OR COMFORT UNTIL THIS ONLY AND ETERNAL SON OF GOD IN HIS UNFATHOMABLE GOODNESS HAD COMPASSION UPON OUR MISERY AND WRETCHEDNESS, AND CAME FROM HEAVEN TO HELP US. THOSE TYRANTS AND JAILERS, THEN, ARE ALL EXPELLED NOW, AND IN THEIR PLACE HAS COME JESUS CHRIST, LORD OF LIFE, RIGHTEOUSNESS, EVERY BLESSING, AND SALVATION, AND HAS DELIVERED US POOR LOST MEN FROM THE JAWS OF HELL, HAS WON US, MADE US FREE, AND BROUGHT US AGAIN IN THE FAVOR AND GRACE OF THE FATHER, AND HAS TAKEN US AS HIS OWN PROPERTY UNDER HIS SHELTER AND PROTECTION, THAT HE MAY GOVERN US BY HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS, WISDOM, POWER, LIFE, AND BLESSEDNESS."

By tyrants, I'm sure Luther means "sin, death, and the devil," but who or what does he mean by "jailers" if not the Law, and by extension, the Law's Author? Indeed I take him to mean that there was no counsel, help, or comfort, in, among other things, the Law!

I suspect we are entering the much traveled topic of The Third Use of the Law. From the above quote, “in their place” to me means that the Law is no longer useful to us once Christ has redeemed us. I don’t see how you can escape that conclusion, especially as you take your inspiration from Martin Luther and his Large Catechism.

Yet, your reference to John 14:21 must be taken seriously. What, then, did Jesus mean when he said we must keep his commandments (my NRSV doesn’t say, “God’s”; it says, “my”)? That use of “my” is crucial here. Throughout John’s Gospel, Moses and Christ are contrasted as different – beginning in the very first chapter (1:17). When Jesus here says “my” commandments, he is contrasting his commandments with those of Moses. You cannot get back to the Ten Commandments from John 14:21. Here Jesus is steering his disciples away from Moses’ commandments to his own “new” ones.

So then, what do we have? Well, as Luther pointed out, we have our boast: I know your commandments and hold them dear (a sentiment expressed all throughout Psalm 119, among other Psalms). Then, beyond that, we have our redemption in Jesus Christ, who “keeps” the commandments in our stead and imputes his obedience to us for our justification.

Isn’t THAT what should be the PROMINENT centerpiece of your sermon series? See, I think the Ten Commandments is a fine concept to address in a series of sermons. But! The Gospel of Jesus Christ – and I think the above quote from Luther (capitalized) rightly sets a very high standard for just what that Gospel is – is crucial to the entire sermon, regardless of the sermon’s topical theme. In the back of my mind as I prepare a sermon is this thought: If Jesus Christ did NOT die on the cross and rise from the dead to win salvation and righteousness for me and all my brothers and sisters in the church, then I am

wasting everybody's time. If he DID do all that – and for us – then I am wasting everybody's time if I fail to immerse my sermon in that singular Gospel, so that that Gospel, and only that Gospel, is what radiates from Golgotha into the very lives of those I am preaching to.

If I am one of your parishioners, and I read your announcement in your parish newsletter, I can easily be forgiven if I expect to hear absolutely nothing about the Cross of Jesus Christ in your sermons in this series. Maybe that's because I would be a visitor and don't know you as a preacher, so maybe the parts that I'm identifying as missing from your message are missing because they are already integral to the worship experience your parishioners have come to expect from you.

No, on second thought, even taking my not knowing you into account, I'm still left with this: your presentation of the Ten Commandments in your article doesn't simply leave stuff out, but it contradicts what seems to be left out.

Let me put it this way: Where is the Good News in your description of the upcoming sermon series? What Good News could I expect to hear in your sermons, beginning Sept. 13th, were I to visit your congregation? As best as I can read from your announcement, the Good News is that the Ten Commandments are not my enemy but my friend. The “dos and don'ts” that I see plainly in the text are somehow not negative, but positive, and that “keeping” them makes me a disciple of Jesus and signals that God has freed me from slavery to sin, death, and the devil. Since they are not guidelines, but a way of life, I sense that I'm not supposed to read them literally, but try to get behind them to “know” God, the giver of the commandments. I guess if the commandments are a gracious reminder of who I am and who I ought to be as part of God's chosen people, that means I am simply asked to do my best and let God do the rest.

I commune on a regular basis with others who believe that as well. I suspect it is a popular way of thinking of it. But it amounts to a false gospel. You see, at that point in the above thought process, I'd probably be thinking, "I don't believe this is Good News at all, because it doesn't connect with my life as a sinner." You see, the sinner in me absolutely loves hearing that the Ten Commandments aren't punitive. The Old Adam in me dreads the Cross like the plague, and seeing no hint of it in your announcement, it pleads with me to sign on with you. Unfortunately, for the Old Adam in me, like Paul in Romans 7 I know myself way too well. I know that the sinner in me has only one good thing waiting for him: death through crucifixion with Christ. Anything else is too dangerous to contemplate. It certainly is not Good News.

I know that we all struggle with how to make our sermons relevant, vibrant, and captivating so that the people in the pews aren't bored to tears by the same old formulaic mechanisms many of us grew up with many years ago (I am 51). I do not intend by any of this to minimize that part of the challenge. I find that to be a monumental challenge myself. I also am not suggesting anything formulaic in my assertion that the Gospel of Jesus Christ be front and center in a sermon. As far as I am concerned, we are called in freedom to express that Gospel in any form we find helpful for whatever context we are in. I find that each Gospel text in the lectionary has its own unique language for expressing the Gospel. Furthermore, we are called in freedom to express it in the language that touches the lives of the people we are preaching to. All of this means that the form of the sermon is completely up for grabs as long as the Holy Spirit can use – and not waste – the merits and benefits of Christ, and with these gifts from Christ touch the hearts of the people and comfort their troubled consciences (to use Melanchthon's favorite and very important yardstick for sermons

from Apology IV).

The only thing that mystifies me when I hear fellow preachers talk about preaching is the notion that “preaching the Gospel” is the quickest way to put people to sleep, and that instead we should challenge the people, “make them think.” And that invariably slides over into preaching law. There is no third option. The Lutheran Confessions propose a way to do both at the same time – preach the Good News AND get people thinking. That’s what you and I, as Lutheran preachers, are pledged to do every time we get into the pulpit. I pray that my words do not get in the way of the Holy Spirit’s message to you, and I pray that your ministry will always bear much fruit in the Holy Spirit of Christ.

Yours in Christ,
James Squire