

**March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**First reading: Exodus 20: 1-17**  
**Psalm 19**

**Second reading: 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25**  
**Gospel: John 2: 13-22**

**“Read Between the Lines and Get Lost in the Details”**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight for you are our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Rules, rules, rules! Don't do this. Don't do that. Don't envy your neighbor's ass no matter how nice it is. The Decalogue (fancy speak for the Ten Commandments) are only ten of the 613 mitzvot found in the Torah. And as one of my Hebrew classmates asked a couple of weeks ago as we were studying for a test, “Just what exactly is the difference between מצוה (commandment) and הוראה (law or instruction) anyways?” It would appear the Ten Commandments are straightforward, easy to read, and not hard for us to wrap our minds around. However, I posit if we read between the lines of the Ten Commandments and the other lectionary texts and look at closer at some of the details, in addition to providing guidance about our relationship with God and Jesus, we also receive direction about relationships with ourselves and others and may see these things in a new way.

For example, let's take the fourth commandment. Which is...? (*Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Work six days and do everything you need to do. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to GOD, your God.*) Now as a ministry worker,

‘honoring the Sabbath’ is a challenging conundrum. Most Sundays, you will find me up here from 9:30 in the morning until 7 o’clock at night. Honoring the Sabbath and keeping it holy looks different for ministers but it means something to every practicing follower. Again: *“Don’t do any work—not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your maid, nor your animals, not even the foreign guest visiting in town.”* The reading tells us that to honor this holy, sacred day means neither yourself nor any members of your household or even the vacationer in your city shall do work; but if we read between the lines, this command extends beyond the home to this very building.

Perhaps honoring the Sabbath also means respecting the Sabbath of others. It is general knowledge that Kyle’s day of rest is Monday. As a result, I try not to disturb that time. Sabbath as a holy, revered time means we should not chase down our teacher in the sanctuary to ask about our final grade, approach our counselor for a mini session after Sunday School, discuss our case with our lawyer during fellowship hour, or consult our doctor for medical advice outside the office. Sabbath means we honor their sacred time by making an appointment instead. Thou shalt call during normal business hours. Thou shalt allow people the space to worship without the intrusion of work.

Okay. That wasn’t too hard but let’s look at another commandment; this time we’ll check out the second one regarding idols. If we go further into the Exodus

chapter 20 reading, we get more details behind what God has commanded. The people are terrified and want Moses to act as their advocate; he tries to reason with them and says, 'Don't worry, guys! "God has come to test you" (Exodus 20: 21b).' The overachieving, perfectionist student in me shrinks back at the idea of yet more exams especially as these are the kinds of tests where failure feels unavoidable.

The Israelites are unconvinced by Moses' words and stay at a distance as he approaches 'smokestack' God once more. We learn false idols are clearly a big deal for God because it is repeated in Exodus 20:23 "Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold." And continues by giving more details about acceptable offering types. But God isn't done quite yet and goes on to explain that the altar should be earthen and not to be made of dressed stones (that is decorated ones); chisel usage on the stones is 'profane' and, also forbidden. Lastly, there are to be no steps to climb the altar as to not "expose your nakedness" or "private parts".

These minutia regarding God's laws are puzzling to me. I get the reiteration of the false idols rule; it is all too easy to let any and everything become an idol to us- our phones, sports, food, celebrities, obsessions with staying young, you get the point. I can even get behind these specifics about offerings. But no steps? Are our front steps outside the church a problem for God? What about the bricks used to build the walls? Our altar is wooden; is that earthen enough for God or was God

expecting sod, clay, or dirt? These final verses in Exodus 20 have me lost in the details of God's commands and what they could possibly mean.

Psalm 19 "The law of God is perfect, refreshing the soul." Okay, well, while the law of God may be perfect, I am feeling less refreshed and more along the lines of confused. "The statutes of God are trustworthy, making the simple wise." Back to 1 Corinthians—God says, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise" – well played, God, well played! "The precepts of God are right, giving joy to the heart." Honestly, my joy is limited by my perception of the precepts. "The commands of God are radiant, giving light to the eyes." The details in these commands leave me feeling more in the dark than in the clear light of day. "The decrees of God are firm, and all of them are righteous." Okay...firm and righteous they may be but also getting a little weird with the whole stairs situation.

But of course, we get some relief in today's passage from 1 Corinthians where Paul writes that "... the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom." Reading between the lines and getting lost in the details means these things do not have to make sense to me and I do not need to understand them fully, but "by them [God's] servant is warned; [and] in keeping them there is great reward." This reward is reflected in Exodus 20:6 where God promises to show "love to a thousand generations of those who love me" or as put in The Message: "I am unswervingly loyal to the thousands who love me and keep my commandments."

Fast forward to the reading from John. Jesus decided to go to the temple court. And when he got there, Jesus was royally ticked! We all know what Jesus does. Here we also see Jesus perform fiber crafts; how long did it take him to make a whip out of cords and was he a fan of braiding? God warned us back in Exodus he was a jealous god but clearly, he is also a god who does want the temple to be disrespected or misused. But what if this passage about the temple is deeper than that? This past Wednesday Dr. Dallas Gingles, one of my professors, preached on these same texts and raised an interesting point when he read between the lines and got lost in the details. A quote from his sermon:

“The synoptics (*that is the first 3 books of the Gospel*) tell us about the doves being sold, but only John includes the detail—and emphasizes it—about the sheep and cattle. And the emphasis comes when he writes, ‘Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.’ Jesus doesn’t drive out the doves. Rather, ‘He told those who were selling the doves, “take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”’

- Now, very oddly, the very next thing that happens is that ‘The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”’ *Signs* are ubiquitous in John. Jesus doesn’t perform miracles; he gives signs. It’s official Johannine (jow-ha-nuhn) vocabulary. But why a request for a sign at this point?
  - Remember the addition of ‘my Father?’ to the language of house? By making himself the Son of the Father, Jesus is making a claim to be the heir of the house. This is *his* house exactly because it is the Father’s. This is an extraordinary claim. ‘What can you do to show it, Jesus?!’
- Jesus’s answer is puzzling. The sign is a future conditional: *if* you destroy this temple I *will* raise it up in three days.
  - That’s an odd sign.
- But, as John tells us, ‘he was speaking of the temple of his body.’

- If Jesus is making a claim to be the heir of the temple, and he is relocating the temple to the human body—*this* is ‘my Father’s house’—then what he is actually doing is making a claim to be the heir of all the temples you—we—are.
  - o Jesus is making a claim on your life.”

How’s that for reading between the lines? Just when I thought I had heard all the interpretations possible for this well-known story about Jesus, someone else gets lost in the details and offers a new perspective on the matter. And while I may not understand the finer details of the commandments and how they are perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, firm, and righteous, the wisdom of the cross is crystal clear. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). The wisdom of the cross means we can get lost in the details as we read between the lines with the hope of being rescued by the unswervingly loyal One who makes a claim on our lives.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; One True God;

Mother of us all. Amen.