

Third Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2021
Rev. Phillip Martin

I can still remember the first days of early elementary school when the teacher took great pains to explain classroom rules and consequences. Can you? Explaining those things was a big deal. The message had to get across. Before any real learning could begin, the teacher had to explain how behavior in her classroom was going to look. In my class there was one list on the wall of rules and another list of consequences. In those days, if you broke the rules, the consequences entailed having your name written on the chalkboard in front of class. If you transgressed again, the teacher would go and place a big check mark beside your name. That was bad. If that happened, a note would go home to your parents. I am somewhat embarrassed to admit that if you had walked into one of the classrooms at South Fork Elementary School in Winston-Salem, NC, on any given day you would have known if I was in there because “Phillip Martin” would have been practically engraved on the blackboard. But never a check mark! I learned pretty quickly, like several others of us, exactly how much I could do to get that one warning and then go no farther.

For my daughters, who recently finished elementary school, the system has changed somewhat. Rather than simply punishing bad behavior these days, teachers are just as likely to reward good behavior, and they indicate this by moving a clothespin that has your name on it up or down on a rainbow that is displayed in the room. Everyone starts each day on green, a nice benign color. Do something good, and you “clip up,” as they say, to yellow and orange. Break the rules, and you “clip down” to blue or, God forbid, purple. I had to laugh at what one of my daughters said one year when she was thinking about the following year of school. Very matter-of-factly she remarked, “In second grade, the teacher won’t give you a warning. If you do something wrong, you just ‘clip down.’” I thought to myself: I guess second grade is where it starts to get real.

Whether that’s true or not, it’s clear that the message has gotten across: this is how you are to live and learn in the classroom. It’s gotten across so well, in fact, that my girls have made their own version of the rainbow chart and hung it in their playroom. I’m not going to tell you where my clothespin is.

When the Israelites are delivered from their captivity in Egypt and they make their way, with God’s mighty help, through the waters of the Red Sea, Moses goes up Mt. Sinai to meet with the Lord. When Moses comes down, he doesn’t have a rainbow chart and clothespins. He has ten very powerful, life-giving words that will eventually get engraved in stone. And all the Hebrews learn that this is where it starts to get real.

Every aspect of Hebrew culture and faith will come to be built on these ten words of life, which come to be known as the Ten Commandments. These are the basics, given right here at the beginning of their life together. And God hopes the message gets across: that they are God’s chosen people. That they are freed from slavery and have been given freedom because God is a God of freedom and hears the cries of those who are oppressed.

From a structural standpoint, these ten words are laid out in genius fashion. They're not just willy-nilly thrown out there—"don't do this, don't do that"—which is what I thought as a kid. They all flow very logically and lovingly from each other, starting from the very first one, which actually doesn't even begin as a commandment, but as a statement of grace: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." It's right there at the front of it all: before Israel is asked to do anything, God reminds them of all God has already done, and whose they are. And then the rest of them flow from there: ones that focus on the relationship between God and God's people and then to the ones that focus more on the relationships between God's people.

That's all well and good, but the problem is the message doesn't really get across. Over time, God's people begin to see them as nothing more than a list of rules. Rather than viewing them as they are intended, as a gracious gift that describes and defines the life of a free people, the people of God start seeing them as some authoritarian blackboard name-writing system. God's people become like that selfish, unruly little clever schoolkid who knows exactly how far he can go, and exactly how he can split hairs of interpretation, so as not to get the check beside his name. Or they become completely oblivious and disrespectful, racking up all kinds of checkmarks and not knowing (or really caring) what to do about it.

That right there is a nutshell history of God's people. God sends prophet after prophet in order to call the people back to covenant faithfulness, back to the life God intends for them, but prophet after prophet essentially gets ignored. Some of those prophets end up getting downright angry. They pronounce all kinds of hellfire and brimstone in order to get that message across. Eventually the people of Israel build a temple in Jerusalem in order to put in one place their worship and their devotion to God. While that seems to help somewhat, it isn't too long before the same problems start to creep in again. God's words of life and the wonderful relationship of grace that they are meant to form between God and God's people get used and abused by human sin. When people come inside to worship God and encounter the holy, they end up encountering this entire system of religion that's been set up revolving around the rules of sacrifice.

And it becomes manipulative across the board. The religious leaders use the words of life and the system of sacrifices to manipulate the people. The people use the system of religion to try to manipulate God. People feel like God is manipulating them. And it's hard to get past the feeling that faith—this initial trust in a God who has saved us and desires life for us—is nothing but just a phony rainbow and clothespin system. It looks like the message of God's love isn't ever going to get across.

Then along comes this new prophet who comes up to the temple during the big Passover festival and finds all those manipulative systems of religion and sacrifice. There are tables selling animals for sacrifice, along with booths where you can exchange your Roman coins for currency that Jewish scribes and Temple leaders would accept. The man gets angry. In a very vivid scene of chaos, he makes a whip out of cords, he starts overturning the tables and driving out the merchants.

But if we're listening, we notice that this scene in the temple isn't just about another message that someone's trying to get across. It's not a message about overturning a system of manipulative religion. The message is Jesus, himself. Jesus doesn't just come, like all the other prophets before him, bearing the message of God's forgiveness of sin. Jesus becomes the forgiveness of sin, himself. Hence the confusion about the temple's destruction and rebuilding. He's not talking about the stone temple. He's talking about his very body. What we learn from Jesus, you see, is that God's message is not going to get across until God's message gets a *cross*. Because of the presence of human sin, which is the tendency to think we can control where we ultimately fall on God's big rainbow chart of God's love, the law, the commandments, the gestures of forgiveness, none of it has been getting across. So in Jesus, the message gets a *cross*. All of the things that stand in the way of a direct relationship with God, all those systems and rules and guilt and shame die forever on the cross of Jesus.

It is something that never really seems to make sense: that God would go to this length to redeem this relationship with us, that he would let his own Son become both the rules *and* the consequences for us. As the apostle Paul puts it, "for the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." For the message about the cross makes absolutely no sense at all to those who are still trying and trying to keep their name off God's blackboard. But for those who are aware they will always end up transgressing, the cross is salvation. It's the teacher taking a giant eraser to the chalkboard and saying, "I love you anyway."

One thing, then, we should often think about is, "What message are we giving across here, in our little temple of the Lord, in our ministries in Jesus' name?" Do we give off the impression that we're all about a system of rules? Do we come across as people driven by some sense of game-playing religion, or as those who know that the cross of Jesus claims us as God's children forever, regardless of our brokenness?

The story is told in the congregation I serve about the last big renovation of our worship space. At the beginning of the process an architect was invited in to help the Building Team re-imagine the sanctuary. As he stepped into our church, he immediately focused on the large cross above the altar, suspended against the wall. "That," he said, matter-of-factly, "has to go. No one wants that to be the main thing you see as you enter here. The design is bad." His comment caused an immediate stir among the group. Was he correct? What message does a cross communicate about a community, especially if it's the first thing someone sees? Those comments immediately became a chance for reflection. The committee talked about their own faith and understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection. It had stood there for years and years, but only until an offhand comment by an outsider made were they able to see the life it gave. Ultimately, they decided that the cross was good design.

The actual cross in our building is only an object. The true message is the one written in the life of those who gather beneath it each week. The true design is lived in the compassion and mutual understanding that God works in them. The true force of the cross is known when people live forgiven and free because they know their God has claimed them forever. It's the life the Ten Commandments were intended to foster and flourish and the message God is always trying to get across.

Yes, the most important statement will not be made by architecture, or a set of tablets, and definitely not by a system of rules, but one reflected in our faith in a God who gives himself. When we're at our church best, brothers and sisters, is when we've realized that the message we're trying to get across *is* the cross.

It almost doesn't even make sense. It's the foolishness of God.

Our names have been erased from the blackboard.

And now, my brothers and sisters, things are about to get real.

Thanks be to God!

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