

**SPRING CLEANING**  
*Sermon for Lent 3B-Ex 20:1-17, Jn2: 13-22*  
LPC, 3/4/18

A friend once gave me a bumper sticker that said, “They are not the Ten Suggestions.”

Obviously that which we consider to be the basis of Judeo-Christian ethics is the *Ten Commandments*, not the Ten Suggestions, and we heard the story of their origin in today’s Old Testament lesson from the Book of Exodus. A commandment obviously is much, much stronger than a suggestion. A commandment is an imperative given from a position of authority. The word “commandment” has a much stronger connotation even than the word “law.” A broken law has legal ramifications, while a broken commandment has moral or even cosmic consequences.

Referring to the “Ten Commandments” is so ingrained in our consciousness that we tend never to think about the use of the word “commandment” in the context of God’s covenant with God’s people. But the fact is that the English word “commandment” has nuances that the original Hebrew does not, while the Hebrew word that is translated “commandment,” *mitzvoth*, has nuances that the word “commandment” does not. This is one of many things that makes biblical translation so problematic, and makes insupportable the identification of any one translation, such as the King James, or the NRSV, as the definitive Word of God.

On the other hand, tradition counts for quite a lot in religious matters, and if any bright young translator suggested another translation for *mitzvoth*, it would probably be a career-ender. There simply is no adequate substitute in English. Not “law,” not “rules,” not “guidelines,” and definitely not “suggestions.”

However, the tension between the Hebrew word *mitzvoth* and the English word “commandments” is worth exploring if we are to gain our fullest understanding of this important thing we call the Ten Commandments.

The word *mitzvoth* has other possible translations. One, very similar to “commandments” is “precepts.” Because reading Hebrew often allows for single words to retain multiple meanings, I think it’s interesting and perhaps profitable to allow the idea of “precept” to color our understanding of the Ten Commandments. These are not just rules or requirements, they are the *precepts* upon which God intended God’s creation to function. In a way they are the basis of life on earth.

This adds some gravity to the idea of the Ten Commandments. When we break them, we are not just committing some personal sin, we are in some sense doing violence to the very fabric of God’s good creation.

There is another connotation to the Hebrew word *mitzvoth*. A secondary definition is “good deeds.” Jewish contemplatives place great stock in the practice of *mitzvoth*. The understanding is that performing kindnesses and serving justice serves God in a way that fulfilling the letter of the law alone cannot.

In speaking of the Ten Commandments, there is another provocative translation issue, and that is the use of the English word “shall,” which appears in nearly every Commandment. There really is no Hebrew equivalent to the word “shall.” The “shallness” of the Ten Commandments is implicit in the tense and form of the Hebrew verbs used.

I am not a Hebrew scholar, so I hope I’m getting this right, but the form of the Hebrew verbs being used is also the form used to mean future tense. If, as before in the case of *mitzvot*, we allow the multiple meanings of the Hebrew word to shade our understanding of the English translation, what happens when we read the Commandments in the future tense, using “will” instead of “shall”?

You will not have other gods before me. You will not make idols. You will not use God’s name wrongfully. You will keep the Sabbath holy. You will honor your parents. You will not murder. You will not commit adultery. You will not steal. You will not lie. You will not covet.

I am only suggesting this as an exercise to make the point that the Ten Commandments don’t just prescribe correct behavior, they also describe what a life lived in relationship with God looks like. I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Seitz for this insight. The Ten Commandments describe what people *will* do when they are living in covenantal relationship with God.

When we truly covenant with God, when we commit heart and soul and mind and strength to live in relationship with God, God works in us to conform us to the underlying precepts of God’s good creation. Living in relationship with God, there is *always* a better future in which God *will* be honored, the Sabbath *will* be kept, parents *will* be honored, and murder, adultery, theft, dishonesty and jealousy *will* be no more.

Now, we’re not there yet, are we? Our job is to have faith that God *will* work out God’s purpose. In the meantime we do our best to conform to the underlying *precepts* of God’s good creation, knowing that we can’t do it without God, knowing that the final fulfillment of these precepts will be God’s work alone, but that it will happen in God’s good time.

The creators of the Lectionary knew what they were doing in assigning this passage about the Ten Commandments in the middle of Lent. Lent is a time to remind ourselves of the underlying *precepts* of God’s good creation and renew our efforts to live in conformity with them.

This can mean an occasional radical house-cleaning, which is what I think the story of Jesus’ “cleansing of the Temple” can mean to us. Lent is literally a spring cleaning of the stuff in our hearts, minds, souls and bodies that does not support relationship with God. The Commandments, the precepts, the good deeds, the *mitzvot* that God has set before us guide us in making the decisions of what in our lives to throw out and what to keep, repair and clean.

Happy Spring Cleaning! May it be a mitzvah to you.