

**The Reverend Marjo Anderson**

**Narrative Lectionary 1.5**  
**Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17**

**7 October 2018**  
**Salem, Bridgeport**

**“Full Circle”**

First, a short exercise.

You should have in your program an insert that lists the 10 commandments.

What I'd like you to do is to rank them in order of how easy they are to keep.

So “1” for the one that's easiest to keep down to “10” for the one that's hardest, ok?

Alright – go to it.

- 10 You shall have no other gods.
- 8 You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.
- 7 Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
- 9 Honor your father and your mother.
- 1 You shall not murder.
- 2 You shall not commit adultery.
- 3 You shall not steal.
- 6 You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
- 5 You shall not covet your neighbor's house.
- 4 You shall not covet your neighbor's spouse,  
nor their manservant or maidservant, their ox or donkey,  
nor anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Now, if you just consider what the commandments mean in a literal way,  
there are some that seem pretty easy to keep, right? Like “You shall not murder”.

Or if we're talking about not worshipping other gods  
like Baal in ancient Israel, or Roman or Greek gods,  
that's a pretty easy one to keep also.

We can train ourselves not to swear using God's name,  
we can go to church on Sundays,  
we can honor our parents,  
and we can refrain from committing adultery, or theft, or telling lies about others,

But then we get to those coveting commandments  
and those are a bit tougher because they're not about our acts but our thoughts.

And then Jesus comes along, and seemingly clouding the waters,  
makes all of the commandments more difficult,

by making them all about our thoughts:

<sup>21</sup>*You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'....*

<sup>22</sup>*But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,  
you will be liable to judgment....*

<sup>27</sup>*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'.*

<sup>28</sup>*But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust  
has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*

And at this point, it is clear: we will never, ever be able to keep any of the commandments.  
Never. Ever. So why even have them?

Well, in Lutheran theology, we understand that there are 3 uses of the law.

**The first use of the law is to curb** the sinful nature of both Christians and non-Christians  
through fear of punishment.

That's why the 10 commandments and all the other laws in the Old Testament  
were given to the Israelites –

to give them a structure on which to build a civilized society,  
and it's what undergirds our legal system to this very day.

**The second use of the law is to mirror**, and is focused primarily on us who are people of faith,  
for it shows us how impossible it is for us to be perfect like God  
and that there is no way we can ever earn or deserve God's love or favor.

And it is this use of the law

that had Martin Luther trapped in a world of sin and guilt for much of his life.

Back in his time, there were morality plays written to frighten people into good behavior,  
using images similar to the fearsome ones in Dante's "Inferno".

Paintings of Christ showed him, not as a merciful Savior, but as the "Pantocrator",  
the ultimate judge who it seemed would be happy to send a person to hell,  
even if it was only on a technicality.

The Roman Catholic Church used their power to frighten people  
into buying indulgences to keep them out of hell and shorten their time in purgatory.

For Luther, for many of his colleagues, and for most of the common people of his time,  
there was *only* the law, the cruel, oppressive, and unrelenting tyranny of the law.

To get out from under such tyranny, Luther tried confessing his sins,  
but there were not just his actions, but his words, and his thoughts to confess,  
and he spent hours and hours and hours in the confessional,  
trying the patience of his loving father confessor and friend.

He tried to be the best monk possible,

fasting more, praying more, reading more, and working more than anyone else.

He even tried abusing himself physically.

But none of this worked, because all he could see was

how he could never, ever measure up,

how he could never, ever keep all of God's commandments,

how he could never, ever earn God's love.

He began to violently despair and wrote,

*“Is it not against all natural reason that God out of his mere whim deserts men, hardens them, damns them, as if he delighted in sins & in such torments of the wretched for eternity, he who is said to be of such mercy and goodness? This appears iniquitous, cruel, and intolerable in God, by which very many have been offended in all ages.*

*And who would not be?*

*I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created.*

*Love God? I hated him!”*

And then one day, Luther was studying scripture, and came across this verse in Galatians:

*“...no one is justified before God by the law, for “the righteous shall live by faith”.*

Luther described that experience this way:

*“Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith.*

*Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.*

*The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love....*

*If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love... in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness.”*

In other words, we can’t stop with the second use of the law

which shows us how hopeless it is for us

to ever keep all the commandments or measure up or deserve God’s love, or we will simply despair.

The whole point of that use of the law is to drive us to our knees,

where we admit our sin and failure and utter inability to keep God’s laws,

and put all our faith in the God who made us and loves us

more than we can ever hope to imagine.

We confess our sin, we trust in God’s understanding and love,

and then we experience the exquisite joy of divine grace.

But it doesn't end there.

For Luther says that the way we respond to that experience of grace is that we should *"thank and praise, serve and obey God"*.

You notice that last verb? "Obey". Which is the ultimate irony, isn't it?

God gives us the law, it becomes clear we cannot possibly keep it, which leaves us dependent on God's grace, for which we should not only be grateful, but because of which we should obey God's laws.

Which brings us to the third use of the law.

**The first use of the law was to curb, the second was to mirror, & the third is to guide –** and in this, the law becomes our helper.

Forgiven, we strive to forgive,  
and loved, we strive to love others,  
even to laying down our lives for our friends.

And so it goes:

from the law,  
which reflects our inability to keep it,  
which drives us to grace,  
which then causes us to respond with obedience to the law.

And there we are back, full-circle – from law, to grace, to law.

But, at least in this life, the circle is a never-ending one,  
so it never stops at the law, but always, always continues to grace. **Amen**