

The first half of the commandments is about Israel's relationship with God. The second half is about their relationships with each other. And there is nothing unique about these commandments. Every society has rules against murder and theft and other acts that pit neighbor against neighbor. Most societies at least give lip service to honoring elders and tradition. One of my favorite things to show my students about Confucius is a cranky rant he wrote about modern music (modern in the 5th century BCE), in which he said, "But now, in the new music, [the performers] advance and retire without any regular order; the music is corrupt to excess; there is no end to its vileness. Among the players, . . . boys and girls are mixed together, and *there is no distinction between father and son*. Such music can never be talked about, and cannot be said to be after the manner of antiquity." So even in the 5th century BCE, the wisdom of the elders needed defending.

I've said that the Ten Commandments are a way of rehumanizing people traumatized by slavery and exploitation. The second half reminds them that they and their neighbors are full human beings, dependent on each other to maintain their humanity. But even the stories prior to the story of the Decalogue show us that for Israel, these common civic virtues have a unique rationale.

In Genesis, Abraham and Sarah are visited by three travelers. The travelers arrive out of the wilderness, and if Abraham and Sarah had turned them away, they might well have died. By the moral code of the ancient near east, Abraham was obligated to take them in, and Genesis says that he ran from his tent to greet the travelers. Sarah prepared an extravagant feast for them, and they were honored for being guests. Now it turns out that these travelers are divine—messengers sent from God—and they have good news for the couple about a miraculous birth they'll

experience. But Abraham and Sarah didn't know that when they welcomed them. They treated them as they would have treated any human travelers—and that's the beautiful irony: in Genesis, God visits personally in the form of a human being. You don't know if you're receiving God or just a person, because the presentation is exactly the same. And after all, human beings were made in the image of God, so any traveler presents as God! These commandments are not just rehumanizing; they're divinizing.

You've probably heard the old story about the monastery that had fallen on hard times. Its many buildings had once been filled with young monks and its big church had resounded with the singing of prayers, but it was now nearly deserted. People no longer came to be nourished by the prayers and presence of the monks. Only a handful of old, old monks shuffled through the cloisters and praised God with heavy hearts.

Nearby, on the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi built a little hut. One day, his heart heavy with the burden of the monastery and the failing of the faith, the abbot decided to visit the rabbi. The rabbi greeted the abbot warmly. Both knew God; both knew the difficulties of keeping alive the faith in their communities; both were concerned for the welfare of those they served.

The rabbi told the abbot, 'The Messiah is among you'. 'Tell this to your monks, but only once. After that no one must ever say it aloud again'.

The monks were startled by this revelation. 'What could it mean?' each asked himself. 'Is dirty and sloppy Brother John the Messiah?' 'Is moody Father Matthew or crothy Brother Thomas the Messiah?' 'What could this mean?' 'The Messiah is among us?' They were deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching. But according to the

instruction, no one ever mentioned it again.

Days and weeks went by. The monks began to treat one another with special reverence and respect. There was a gentle, wholehearted, human, yet divine, quality about them which was hard to describe but easy to see. They lived with one another as men who had found something special. They prayed and read Scripture as men who were always looking for something. The occasional visitors found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks. Before long, people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks and young men began asking to become part of the community.

This is really a story about recognizing what already is true: that God is present in the neighbor. That's why Jesus says, "That which you've done to the least of these my sisters and brothers, you've done to me." That's why Mother Teresa said, "Whenever I meet someone in need, it is really Jesus in his most distressing disguise." The social part of the Ten Commandments reminds Israel that the neighbor is not only fully human but also an image of the divine. We are called to live together with the consciousness that we are in the presence of God.

It's hard to visualize such a consciousness at the same time that we are constantly reminded of what a broken and polarized society we live in. So the question becomes, what does spiritual wisdom have to offer us in this singularly awful time? Richard Rohr writes that "Some prefer to take on the world: to fight it, change it, fix it, and rearrange it. Others deny there is a problem at all. "Everything is beautiful," they say and look the other way. Both instincts avoid holding the tension, the pain, and the essentially tragic nature of human existence." He asserts that there is a Third Way, which we learn through contemplative prayer. In the Third Way,

We stand in the middle, neither taking the world on from another power position nor denying it for fear of the pain it will bring. We hold the hardness of reality and the suffering of the world *until it transforms us*, knowing that we are both complicit in evil and can participate in wholeness and holiness. Once we can stand in that third spacious way, neither directly fighting or fleeing, we are in the place of grace out of which genuine newness can come. *This is where creativity and new forms of life and healing emerge.*

This rings true to me, because it echoes a lot of what Parker Palmer has written about paradox and the ability to hold opposites in tension (not choosing one or the other) until our minds and hearts are broken open to new ways of seeing.

Unfortunately, I can't bring you along on Richard Rohr's next step because I'm still having trouble understanding it. He wants to share the writings of another contemplative, Cynthia Bourgeault, about what she calls The Law of Three, by which solutions to impasses or sticking points come by learning how to spot and mediate third force, which is present in every situation but generally hidden. But I have to confess that I don't yet understand the Law of Three, so the sermon has to kind of trail off at this point.

Well, not completely. What I do understand is that contemplative prayer helps loosen the hold on our brains that binary thinking has, where we can see *only* opposites: *my* priority for the stranger/*their* priority for border security. *My* priority for affordable education/*Their* priority for lower taxes. *My* priority for being safe in public spaces/*Their* priority for access to firearms. If those binaries were easy to resolve, we would have done that already. So I have to say I'm pretty motivated to learn and acquire non-dual consciousness, which is what you develop through contemplative prayer. Rohr says, "Imagine how the energies of our planet would shift if we as Christians took seriously our obligation to work with the Law of

Three as our fundamental spiritual praxis.” With the wider-open eyes that come from contemplative prayer, we would be able to reframe impasses and sticking points in a way that actually moves us, as the Resurrection moved us past the irreconcilable opposition between Jesus and crucifixion. I can’t flesh it out any more than that. But I can tell you, as people who yearn for the beloved community in which each person reminds us of God, that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. A contemplative practice is the discipline that prepares us to see and enact those things in the ways that God will give us, in the places where we are.

Let us pray: God, we do not know how to pray as we ought, but your Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. Train our vision and our hearing so that we may come closer to the mind of Christ, and so that our human community becomes more fully your reign on earth as in heaven. Amen.

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