

Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Lent

During the Victorian era, one how-to-do-it-right manual was Lady Gough's *Book of Etiquette*. In this volume, putting books by male authors next to books by female authors was forbidden – unless the authors were married. When I lived in Alabama for a summer internship back in 2000, it was technically still on the rulebooks that blacks and whites couldn't marry. And here in Pennsylvania, up until just a few months ago, fireworks stores couldn't sell heavy-duty fireworks to PA residents.

Rules. Laws. Aren't our lives full of them? Speed limits, work policies, family chores, gravity. And to top it all off, the Church gives us rules to follow too! The most famous of these we heard about in our first reading today: the 10 Commandments – largely a list of prohibitions given to Moses for the good of God's people. But, why did God give those laws? Or what's the point of rules in our society? Are we just supposed to follow them, and then voila, we're good citizens, or good followers of God, for that matter?

Well, I'd like to propose today that you and I are *not* disciples of Jesus simply by keeping the 10 Commandments, and period that's it. Now, the 10 Commandments are a critical, a foundational, part of our Judeo-Christian heritage – reminding us mostly of the things we ought not do. But, as Jesus tells us, to be a follower of His means we must keep the greatest commandment to “love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength” and to “love our neighbor as ourselves.”

It's interesting that these two greatest teachings of Jesus in a real way actually summarize the 10 Commandments: the first three to love God, and the second seven to love our neighbor. But the whole point of God commanding us not to do certain things is to enable us to be free to do others. That means by avoiding sin – those transgressions against God's commandments – we become free to live out God's greatest commandment – to love. In other words, *not* committing sin is *not* the definition of a good Christian – it's just the groundwork for the Christian life. Rather, being a good Christian is, above all, about love – in particular the sacrificial love that Jesus shows us in the Eucharist and on the cross.

Love, then, is the measure of how we're doing in our life of discipleship: the more we're loving, in the truest sense of how Jesus loves, the more closely we're following Him. But, we need some concrete means to measure our growth against. And this is what God's commandments do for us. If we're really to be loving, for which there is no limit, then at a bare minimum we can't be sinning against God and one another.

We call such a measuring an Examination of Conscience – when we compare our standard of holiness to Jesus', and not the world's or anyone else's. Most often we make an examination of conscience to prepare for Confession. And to help you this Lenten season as you prepare to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I've placed an Examination of Conscience on the ledges behind the last pews and at the side doorways for you to take on your way out today/tonight.

Again, our focus should be on Jesus and loving God and our neighbor, not on merely keeping a list of commandments. Our goal is to love God and neighbor more perfectly, not on trying to offend them as little as possible. If our goal is simply to *sin less*, then we miss the big picture. It's when our goal is to *love more*, that we want to sin less. I want to say that again: It's when our goal is to love more, that we actually want to sin less.

And so, as we journey deeper into Lent and recall our own need for repentance – that is, receiving God's forgiveness for our sins – we realize that there is a greater purpose here. It's not just about avoiding sin. Rather, Jesus calls us to *not* sin so that we can be free *to* love. And so, may our Lenten fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and other sacrifices not just be ends in themselves, but rather lead us to a deeper love for others by what we do, how we think, and what we say. God bless you.