

### Third Sunday of Lent - B

When you think of the 10 commandments, what image comes to mind? I imagine the two stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. That's the image we see most often in pictures from the Old Testament about Moses and the Law.

There's another image of the 10 commandments that I would like to propose for your consideration. I invite you to think of the 10 commandments as a fence.

Here's my rationale. I think a fence is a good image for the 10 commandments because of what God says at the beginning of today's reading.

He reminds the Israelites that he was the one "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery." The point of God's saving action was for the sake of the freedom of his chosen people. So, the 10 commandments can be seen as those things we have to do to maintain the freedom that God won for us.

So, when God says "You shall not have other gods besides me," we could imagine that that's because God is a jealous God. And there are places in the Old Testament when that idea is clearly stated. But if we look at the first commandment as a way God has of preserving our freedom, another thought comes to mind. We are to have no other gods before God because to do so would be a form of slavery.

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For one thing, there are no other gods. There's only one God in three persons. So, any other "gods" are really just figments of our imagination. And when we give that much power to our imagination, sinners that we are, bad things happen.

The commandment is like a fence keeping us from going over the cliff, or into the quicksand, or any other dangerous place that we'd like to imagine.

The Gospel story of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple is a good reminder that even good things, if they take on too much importance, can end up being the idol that threatens our freedom.

Jesus prayed in the temple. As a child his family made the annual pilgrimage there. He holds temple worship in high regard. But that doesn't mean that he's willing to turn a blind eye to the abuses that cropped up over time as the temple became the center not only for religious worship but for the resistance against the Romans and for all things Jewish as well.

It all became too much! Jesus drives the money changers out so that "his Father's house" could be restored to its original intention—that it would be the place where people were able to come to know God as the merciful God that he is rather than get sidetracked

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by the whole business of sacrificing animals, making donations to the temple's upkeep, support of the priestly class, etc.

“Too much of a good thing” is probably the easiest trap to fall into when we are trying to abide by the commandments. Some good things can easily be given so much importance that they crowd out other good things, even the best thing, which is to keep God in the center of our lives.

Caring for our children is a good and essential value, but we've all probably experienced families in which the children are not simply cared for, but overindulged as well. They can become little monsters. We may not look at that as going against the first commandment, but it might. We can make an idol out of the desire that our children would have it better than we did.

Owning one's own home is a good thing, but it can get to be so important that the person living there can't see when it has become too much. At that point does the home end up being the center of the person's life? I know people who refuse to move even after their homes become more than they can manage. That would be dangerous. It begins to take up all our energy which would be better used elsewhere.

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Sometimes the center of our lives can be occupied by a favorite sports team, or TV show, or maybe just the general effort to keep ourselves entertained. All those options, while good when kept within limits, can prove deadly to our spiritual lives when given free rein and allowed to move into the central place in our lives.

What lies on the other side of the fence in the case of each of the commandments is the reality that sin leads to lack of freedom just as falling off a cliff leads to being held in the sway of gravity. Once you take that fateful step the consequences are unavoidable.

God would save us from all that, and direct our living to those conditions in which we can really live and thrive, life within the commandments. It's not so much about God being jealous for himself as it is about God being jealous for us. He wants fullness of life for us, and he knows where the danger lurks. He has put a fence there, with clear indications of the dangers on the other side. Why would we want to cross over?