

Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Law and Order
February 16, 2020
Fr. Max Oliva, S.J.

It is the Sixth Sunday of the Year, Ordinary Time, Cycle A, and the Mass readings concern law and order (not the television show version!).

Let's take a look at the First Reading; it is from the Book of Sirach. The author of this book was a wise man who lived in Jerusalem. He was thoroughly imbued with a love of the law. He was an experienced observer of life and wrote to help the people of his day to maintain the Covenant between God and them, by faithfully following the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments are divided into two parts: the first 3 point us in the direction of our creature-hood and our respect for God; Numbers 4-10 refer to our interpersonal relationships, how we treat one another.

They "order one's life" – both personally and in relation to others, to life in community. The traditional way of reading most of the Commandments is in the negative form of "Do Not's" – Do not steal, do not be dishonest, do not covet, etc.

Ian Knox, in his book, "Theology for Teachers," offers a positive rendering of each:

- I. Recognize, accept, and worship only the One, True God.
- II. Respect and reverence God.
- III. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
- IV. Honor your father and your mother.
- V. Respect life, and the bodily integrity of every person, including your own.
- VI. Respect the integrity of married life.
- VII. Respect the personal freedom of others.
- VIII. Respect the truth.
- IX. Respect the integrity of marriage even in intention and desire.
- X. Respect the right of your neighbor to own property.

The Ten Commandments are concerned with basic human morality. Pope Francis writes: "They show us a path to travel and also constitute a kind of 'moral code' for building just societies."

The values inherent in the Commandments are found at the heart of who we are as children of God, of the quest for human rights, the right to life, and the sustainability of the planet.

The Psalmist for today promotes the Ten Commandments in this exclamation: "Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!" The Psalmist encourages us to ask God for the gift of discernment – "that we may observe the Law and keep it with all our heart."

PAGE TWO

Those of us who are Christians, while respecting and honoring the Ten Commandments, find our ethics in the Eight Beatitudes that Jesus taught. In these he encourages us not just to avoid sin but to constantly pursue the good.

Jesus had a genuine respect for the Commandments, in his action and teaching. His emphasis, however, is not on external conformity to the law but what is in a person's heart. Jaime Waters, Associate Professor of Catholic Studies at DePaul University, explains:

“In the Gospel, St. Matthew shows Jesus' connection to Judaism by affirming the importance of the law and the prophets. He frames Jesus' teachings as interpretations, expansions, and nuances to the laws and the prophets, not as contradictions of them.”

In hearing Confessions, I have met people who seem to come out of the negative Ten Commandments mode; they have a grocery list of moral mistakes, often written out so as not to forget even one! I have also heard the confessions of people who are seeking to find out the root causes of their sins so they can be better people.

One of my favorite writers, Lewis Smedes, notes that Jesus saw that the key to the Commandments is love. He wrote: “Love turns the negative “Don'ts into positive “Do's. Love turns the passive avoidance of evil into the active doing of good....Law without love tells us not to kill a stranger; law with love moves us to go out of our way to help a wounded enemy.” (Mere Morality)

CONCLUSION

Heavenly Father, we ask you for the grace to see and the wisdom to acknowledge you as our Source and our Sustainer.

Help us to always be aware and committed to the needs of our brothers and sisters, especially those most in need of your help.

Help us to follow the path you have set for us with integrity and courage to do what you wish of us, with love and joy.

Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119; Matthew 5:17-37

AMEN

Fr. Max Oliva, S.J.
February 16, 2020