

Imagine...a world in which there was murder, adultery, stealing, people wanting what belongs to someone else, and lying. Of course, we don't have to imagine such a world—it *is*. And we get to think about it almost every day. And of course, there always has been such a world.

And into such a world, a word comes from beyond which says: *Thou shalt not!* Apparently, a word must come from somewhere that says *No!* And it isn't an arbitrary No...or a No from someone who just likes to say No. This No is crucial. This No makes a difference whether life is good or miserable. And so, the last words of Moses, before he dies, was this: Choose this life. *Choose life!*

Obviously, the Bible believes that that moral commandment comes from God. Whether it comes from a fiery revelation on Mt. Sinai...or it rises up within the consciences of human beings, we believe it comes from God. And it is possible to see it as a great gift of a God who cares, who is invested in the life of the world.

It makes a difference if we learn the “Thou shalt not” when we are young...and that someone keeps reminding us as we get older. Human beings have an astonishing ability to forget the moral commandment, even when we are Christians. We are never too old or too spiritual or too religious to be reminded again to *choose life*.

So when Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you”, he was first referring to these “Thou shalt not”. And he was reaffirming that there is just no escaping the critical importance of them for every human being. Somebody has to keep saying it, even when we keep failing them.

And then, surprisingly, Jesus said...*Yes, but...there is also more...much more*. Don't just stop with the commandments. What goes on *inside of us* matters--where we struggle with the vexing challenges of being a human being...the difficulty of navigating our own anger and need for reconciliation...where we have to sort out what we can have and what we cannot have...where we have to anguish over when to keep holding onto a person and when we have to let them go...and where we have to weigh the importance and the cost of telling the truth. These are hard places within ourselves to enter, and they are easy places to avoid. It is easier to live on the surface with the rules. Yet Jesus wants us to go within our hearts, to these hard places, willingly.

The apostle Paul had a really tough church in Corinth. For the most part, it seems, they were observant of the 10 commandments, and on top of that, they were very conversant in spiritual wisdom and gifted with spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues and prophecy and healing. They looked impressive. And yet, Paul, admonished them, saying: “You know, brothers and sisters, I cannot really speak to you as spiritual people but rather as infants in Christ. You are just not ready yet, because: Consider all this jealousy and quarreling among you.” In other words, it was obvious to Paul that they had not gone yet to where Jesus wanted them to go—to the hard places within themselves, out of which jealousy and quarreling comes. Because it is from within...that repentance may be discovered. And it is from within--in the secret places of our own struggle--where mercy and kindness may come.

One of the perennial fears—and complaints--against Christians is that they are quickly judgmental. There are plenty of people who would rather talk to their bartender than their priest. :) I get that. But what is this all about? They know they can tell the bartender the truth because the bartender has heard everything and knows the lay of the land of the human heart. The bartender has also sat on the other side of the bar. There is however a fear that the priest can only attend to the “Thou shalt not” and not the lay of the land of the human heart--and can actually listen. Alcoholics Anonymous has a thing or two to teach us there. As does, of course, Jesus himself.

The world desperately needs to be reminded to choose life. And that our choices matter when we attend to the moral commandments—or we do not. And the world desperately needs people who are willing to struggle with their own hearts. And it can make a difference when we do that in the company of Jesus.