

Children

After the children gather, I shake the small cardboard box I have brought. The distinctive noise that results cannot be mistaken. "What do you suppose I have in this box?" I ask the children. "Money!" they answer with an air of excited anticipation. "Yes, the box contains money," I agree. Then I open it and take out a quarter-sized coin made from copper. I hold it up for everyone to see and ask, "Is this a penny?" "No," the children respond. "But it's the same color as a penny," I protest. "Are you sure it's not a penny?" "It's too big to be a penny," one child says. "You're right," I tell him. "Perhaps it's a dime. It's got this big number 10 on one side." Again I hold it up for the children, then have them pass it around for a closer look as we continue.

"No, it's too big to be a dime," a girl declares. "And it's the wrong color," another adds. "Well, gee," I answer, "do you suppose it's not an American coin at all? Could it be from another country?" The children agree that it must be since it is not currency any of them recognize. "Actually," I proceed, "all of the coins in this box are from Hong Kong. It's definitely foreign money. Now, suppose I needed some money to pay my United States income tax. Could I use this money from Hong Kong to do that?" "No," the children tell me. "You'd have to use American money."

"But what if this was the only money I had?" I probe further. "What could I do then?" The children think a moment. Then one of them offers, "You might get someone to give you American money for your foreign money." "That's a good idea!" I respond. "I might trade this money for the same value in U.S. coins. "The reason I brought foreign money today is because of the story about Jesus' visit to the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the Jewish Passover. All Jewish men over a certain age had to pay a Temple tax. And just as I would need American money to pay my U.S. income tax, they had to have Jewish money to pay the Temple tax. So, if they came for Passover with foreign money (Greek, or Roman, or Persian, or whatever), they had to exchange it.

"That's why there were people called money-changers in the Temple. They earned their living by exchanging foreign money for Jewish money so people could pay their Temple tax.

"Suppose for a moment that you were money-changers and I came to you with a foreign coin that was worth one dollar. If you only gave me back 95 cents and kept a nickel for yourselves, that would probably be all right with me because I knew you were doing me a favor to exchange my money at all. But, what if you kept more than that? What if you kept 25 cents and only gave me back 75 cents?" "That wouldn't be fair," several children respond. "No, it wouldn't be fair," I agree. "I would be charging you more than my services were worth. And that's what happened to the folks who came to the Temple to exchange their money. The money-changers charged them a lot more than was fair. When Jesus saw what was going on, what happened?"

"He got angry and turned over the tables and scattered money all over the place," a boy answers. "Yes," I reply, "Jesus got angry. And it wasn't just the business with the money-changers that angered him. Back in that time, the Jews practiced animal sacrifice, and the animals used for this had to be absolutely perfect.

"Animals were for sale both inside and outside the Temple. Inside, a pair of doves might cost as much as twenty times what they would cost outside. The problem was that if a person purchased a sacrificial animal outside the Temple, the persons who inspected the animals to be sure they

were perfect would almost always find something wrong. Then the person who had bought animals outside would have no choice but to buy more animals inside the Temple -- at a much higher price."

"But that wasn't FAIR!" another boy exclaims. "No, it wasn't fair. And what the money-changers were doing wasn't fair either. That's why Jesus was so angry."

"We don't usually think of anger when we think of Jesus. But sometimes, even he got angry. That day in Jerusalem, he shouted at the people in the Temple, 'This is a house of prayer, and you have turned it into a den of thieves!' He was angry because the people who came to worship were being taken advantage of; he was angry because what the money-changers and animal inspectors were doing was dishonest and unfair."

"Sometimes it is okay to be angry. Sometimes it's even important to be angry. When something is truly wrong and we are moved to action by anger, then anger becomes a good thing. It was Jesus' love for justice and rightness that moved him to anger; it was his compassion and love for the worshipers who were being treated unfairly that caused him to make a whip and drive everyone out."

"All of us get angry at times. Sometimes our anger is good; sometimes it isn't. The only way to tell is to understand the source of our anger. If we are angry just because something didn't go the way we wanted it to or just because we were asked to clean up our room before we went to play, or something like that, then it's something we need to let go of. But if our anger is because someone is being treated unfairly, if it is anger against hatred, or mistreatment, or meanness, then our anger is a good thing. Then it is like the anger Jesus unleashed when he cleared the Temple."

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I

This Lent the First Readings from the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures present various covenants between God and his people. We reflect on them during Lent to help us have a greater understanding of the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus which we celebrate at Easter. Two weeks ago we had the covenant of the rainbow that God made with his people when he promised he would never give up on his people. Last Sunday we had the covenant with Abraham when he trusted that God would provide after being told to sacrifice his son. The message was that God knows the inner turmoil we may have in our faith lives and gives us the strength to grow in faith even in the most difficult times of our lives.

This Sunday we are presented with the covenant made through Moses, the Ten Commandments. This covenant was so solemn that the Israelites kept the tablets of the covenant in a specially made beautiful platform and tent which they called the Ark of the Covenant. Eventually, under King Solomon, they would build a Temple to house the Ark and the precious commandments. What was so important to the Israelites was that these commandments told them what God wanted them to do for them to continue receiving his special care. They practiced the Ten Commandments so they could remain the Chosen People.

We also are called to practice the Ten Commandments as our response to God's presence, his choice of us. I would like to take a deeper look at a few of the commandments today.

It is rather natural, certainly human, for us to want to do everything as easily as possible. This includes the very actions we were created for: to know, love and serve the Lord. We tend to cheapen our following of God. We tend to cheapen the foundation law of God's covenant with us, the Ten Commandments. Just look at the first two commandments. We cheapen the First Commandment into, simply, don't practice idolatry, as though we are inclined to offer incense to a statue in our homes. But the commandment is much more than this. It is a commandment not to put anything before God. The materialist is an idol worshiper. His God is his money, his stuff. A person caught up in promiscuity is an idol worshiper, his God is his body. The selfish narcissistic individual is an idol worshiper; his God is himself. The Jewish Temple priests of today's Gospel were more concerned with the money they were making in the Temple than worshiping God in the Temple. Jesus accused them of making money their god, violating the first commandment. He threw them out of the Temple.

We talk about keeping holy the Sabbath Day and note the obligation we have to celebrate the Lord's Supper on Sundays. I am sure that before the pandemic there were people who attended Mass only because they were obliged to attend. One man told me that he goes to Church to keep God happy, as though Divine Eternal Bliss depended on his presence in Church. As you know, due to the pandemic the Sunday obligation has been lifted. Still, it is wonderful to see so many people attending Mass simply because they want to be there and need to be there. The obligation to attend Church and receive the sacraments is secondary to our deep need to experience the

real presence of the Lord at the Last Supper, on the Cross and in the Eucharist. Many of those who are not able to go to Mass watch it on our YouTube stations and are not concerned with fulfilling an obligation as they are with praying on Sunday.

Consider the Sixth Commandment, *Thou shalt not commit adultery*. A number of years ago I was a DRE in a parish and we were practicing first confession. So they walked into the box and they were to say Bless me father up to these are my sins and then they were supposed to say the act of contrition, but this boy said Adultery. I stopped him and said that this was not confession, but what was adultery. He said that he told his little sister what to do and he acted like an adult. I said that there are sins only a child can commit like disobeying parents. Adultery are adult only sins and then I shut the screen. Anyway, people only consider the sexual dimension of the Sixth Commandment. It is a lot deeper than that. Adultery is not just about sex. It is about putting others and things before the one we are committed to in life. Essentially it is a violation of a vow made to another to find God by giving his or her all to that person, or in the case of a priest or religious, those people, who are their way to God.

Everybody wants religion to be easy. The Jews wanted signs so they would not have to take steps of faith. Many people today travel throughout the world looking for miracles to be the basis of their faith. The gentiles, the Greek philosophers, wanted neat theories on who God is and who Jesus is. Many people today get caught up in rationalizing their way out of faith and morality. "We," St. Paul says to the Corinthians, "offer something that is not based on rationalization nor on wonders. We preach Christ crucified." The crucifix both reminds us of Christ's sacrifice and calls us to join him in sacrificing ourselves for him and for his father's kingdom. This is not easy. This is, though, the way of the Lord.

The Ten Commandments call us to a way of life that is out of tune with the society the media presents, and, to some degree, out of tune with our own society. Honesty, respect for parents, fidelity, respect for property, putting God before all else, giving him a day a week, are all ways that we are distinct from others. To be distinct, to be separate for the Lord, is what we mean when we say, "We are called to be holy." We live these commandments so that ultimately we might not be wrapped up in ourselves. We live these commandments in response to God's preference of us as his chosen people.

The Ten Commandments are not outdated. Nor are they easy. But they are effective. By fulfilling this covenant we are responding to God's call to be his people.

II

In the spring of 1894, the Baltimore Orioles came to Boston to play the Boston Beaneaters. Yes, that is what they were called back then--the Boston Beaneaters. The game heated up when Boston third baseman Tommy "Foghorn" Tucker slid into third base and the legendary third baseman John McGraw of the Orioles kicked Tucker in the face. Within minutes all the players from both teams had joined in the brawl. The warfare quickly spread to the grandstands. Among the fans the conflict went from bad to worse. Someone set fire to the stands and the entire ballpark, considered one of the most beautiful ballparks of its time with striking twin spires rising from each corner of the Grand Pavilion, burned to the ground. Not only that, but the fire spread to 107 other Boston buildings as well. (1) "It was a hot game, sure enough," the Boston Globe reported. All that destruction occurred because one player got angry with another. One of the questions we all have to deal with from time to time is what to do with our anger. We are aware of the negative results of anger. Anger can cause us to do some really dumb things.

Seriously, think how often real damage has been done because someone could not control his or her anger.

One of the biggest hits of recent Broadway history, according to the press, has been the musical Hamilton. The show has achieved both critical acclaim and box office success. In 2016, Hamilton received a record-setting 16 Tony nominations, winning 11, including Best Musical, and was also the recipient of the 2016 Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album and the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

The musical is about the life of Alexander Hamilton. What most of us remember from our school days about Alexander Hamilton is how he died.

Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr were two of our most prominent founding fathers. Hamilton was the former Secretary of the Treasury and Burr, believe it or not, was the sitting Vice President of the United States. And yet at Weehawken, New Jersey on July 11, 1804 these two men fought a duel. You think politics are bad today. Politics today are a cakewalk in comparison.

The duel was the culmination of a long and bitter rivalry between the two men. Tensions reached a boiling point when Hamilton defamed Burr's character in a New York political campaign. In the duel Burr shot and mortally wounded Hamilton, who died the next day. Burr survived the duel but the harsh criticism and animosity directed toward him following the duel brought an end to his political career.

Aaron Burr is an instance of a gifted and able man who permitted hatred and anger to get the best of him. Later he confessed that it would have been wiser for him had he taken the sensible view that the world was big enough for both Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton.

What a tragic waste of human life. But it happens all the time. I saw some statistics that revealed that, over a seven-year period, road rage alone resulted in 12,610 injuries and 218 murders on our nation's highways. Including Chevy Chase on the Tappan Zee bridge last week. He climbed into the another motorist car shouting don't you know who I am. When we lose our temper we are in danger of hurting others as well as ourselves.

One of the ways we hurt ourselves when we get angry is the psychological as well as physical damage we do to our own minds and bodies. For example, famed psychotherapist Sigmund Freud taught us that depression is anger turned inward.

A national magazine for pastors once carried a rating system for sermons similar to the rating system we're all familiar with for movies. It went something like this. The person who designed it was a little bit cynical. Here is the rating he gave to various kinds of sermons:

“G” - Generally acceptable to everyone. Full of inoffensive, childlike platitudes; usually described as “wonderful” or “marvelous” by those who leave church to shake the hands of the pastor.

“MC” - For more mature congregations. At times this sermon makes the gospel relevant to today's issues; it may even contain mild suggestions for change. Often described as “challenging” or “thought provoking,” though no one intends to take any action or change any attitudes.

“R” - Definitely restricted to those not upset by truth. This sermon “tells it like it is” and threatens the comfortable; most often described as “disturbing” or “controversial;” usually indicates that the preacher has an outside source of income (since his job security is definitely suspect).

“X” - Positively limited to those who can handle explosive ideas. This sermon really “socks it to 'em.” It is the kind of sermon that landed Jeremiah in the well, got Amos run out of town, set things up for the stoning of Stephen; always described as “shocking” or even in “poor taste.” The pastor who preaches this sermon had better have his or her suitcases packed and life insurance paid for. (1)

According to this rating system the prophet Jeremiah was definitely an X-rated preacher. More than any other prophet Jeremiah suffered as a result of his preaching. People rarely wanted to listen to his pronouncements. And no wonder. It seemed, even to Jeremiah, that all he ever talked about was bad news. At one point Jeremiah cried out: “Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction . . .” (Jeremiah 20:8).

Jeremiah came from a family of priests. God called him to become a prophet at a very young age, and he served God for more than 40 years. He spoke God's words during the reigns of three kings and witnessed the nation's destruction by the Babylonians. He is called the Weeping Prophet because he also wrote the book of Lamentations after Jerusalem was destroyed including the Temple and its people carried off into captivity.

Jeremiah was also a suffering prophet who was persecuted by kings and rejected by his own people because of his forceful condemnation of idolatry and social injustice. Eventually, according to Jewish and Christian tradition, Jeremiah was killed in Egypt by his countrymen who had fled there. (2)

God had called Jeremiah to “tell it like it is” to a people who had disregarded God's law. They rejected his teachings and they suffered for it. And he suffered as well because of their rejection. So it is quite refreshing to come to today's reading from Jeremiah. No fireworks. No scolding of the people of Israel. Jeremiah changes his tone altogether.

This passage was written during Israel's exile. It was a dark time in Israel's history. It's been said that the task of the prophet is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Jeremiah had done his job superbly of afflicting Israel when it was in the comfort of its sin; now it is time for him to be a comforter during their time of exile. In fact, this section of Jeremiah is often called the “Book of Consolation.” The words are so beautiful and so profound that they are welcome to our ears just as they were to the ears of Jeremiah's audience:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord.

“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Let’s think about those moving and hopeful words for a few moments. God is making a new covenant with Israel. Pastor Jeff Strite compares Israel’s situation to a situation in our own land just a few years ago. Some of you’ll remember when mortgage rates stood at 9 to 10%. But then interest rates went down to about half that. What did people do? That’s right. Many people marched down to the bank and refinanced their homes. They asked the banks to make out “new contracts” with lower monthly payments. (3)

Jeremiah is saying that God is unilaterally making a new contract or covenant with the people of Israel.

God is giving the people of Israel the chance to begin again. That’s the wonderful thing about God, isn’t it? God is a God of second and third and even fourth chances.

One night in a church service a young woman felt the tug of the Holy Spirit in her heart. r. The young woman had a very rough past, involving alcohol, drugs and prostitution. But, the change in her was evident. As time went on she became a faithful member of the church. She eventually became involved in the ministry teaching young children. It was not very long until this thoroughly converted young woman had caught the eye and the heart of the a youth minister. The relationship grew and they began to make wedding plans. This is when the problems began.

You see, about one half of the church did not think that a woman with a past such as hers was suitable for a youth minister. The church began to argue and fight about the matter. So they decided to have a meeting. As the people made their arguments and tensions increased, the meeting got completely out of hand. The young woman became very upset about all the things being brought up about her past. As she began to cry, the young man stood to speak. He could not bear the pain all this was causing his wife-to-be. He began to speak and his statement was this: “My fiancé’s past is not what is on trial here. What you are questioning is the ability of Christ to wash away our sin and make us new persons. So, does he wash away sin or not?” (4)

Powerful question: Does Christ wash away sin or not? If he does not, we are all in trouble.

Pastor Dennis Becker uses the analogy of a trick bar of soap. The trick soap looks like a real bar of soap, but when you wash with it, you get dirty instead of clean. The more you wash, the dirtier you get. He recalls watching an episode of the old television program *Candid Camera* when Allen Funt was the host. Funt had planted a fake bar of soap in a washroom and recorded the reactions of those who washed their hands with it. It was funny to watch them scrub and scrub and never get clean. It was comical. (5)

It would be comical if soap did not get our hands clean. If Christ does not wash away our sins, it would be more than comical; it would be tragic. In Jeremiah, God says to us, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

God is the God of second chances. God had a contentious relationship with Israel and indeed with all humanity. But Israel was God's chosen people. They were to be a light unto the world in God's behalf. In this passage from Jeremiah, God calls Himself a husband to Israel. But Israel continually wanders from the relationship. And God has to keep tugging her back. But each time He does bring her back. God loves Israel too much to leave her in her sin.

A few years ago, best-selling author John Grisham wrote a book titled *The Testament*. The key figure in the novel is a disgraced corporate attorney named Nate O'Reilly. Nate is plagued by alcoholism and drug abuse. After two marriages, four detox programs, and a serious bout with dengue fever, Nate acknowledges his need for God. Listen to how John Grisham describes the transformation:

"With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list [of his sins], mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgment of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished Nate had tears in his eyes. 'I'm sorry,' he whispered to God. 'Please, help me.'

"As quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean. He breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing." (6)

That is a fictionalized account of a real life experience that countless people have experienced over the centuries since Christ came into the world. They have known their sins forgiven. They have found themselves made clean.

And they have been able to make a new beginning.

Here's what we need to understand: Christ has made a new covenant with us..

1. Franklin Ishida, "Preaching on the Lessons," *The Clergy Journal*, Oct 2001, p. 38.
2. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/58499038/Overcoming-Low-Self-Esteem-Jeremiah-1-4-10-Sermon>.
3. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/a-new-hope-jeff-strite-sermon-on-kingdom-of-god-70969.asp?Page=2>.

4. Adapted from Andrew H. Rogers, <https://sermons.logos.com/submissions/11254-The-Blood#content=/submissions/11254>.

5. *Emphasis*, Mar/Apr 2001, p. 37.6. (Random House, 1999), p. 374; submitted by Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, IL. Cited at http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/article_print.html?id=25164.

6. James W. Moore, *Standing on the Promises or Sitting on the Premises* (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 1995), pp. 88-89.