



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Taking Commandments to Heart

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Last spring, during the season of Lent, we began each worship service with something called the Penitential Order which includes a recitation of the 10 Commandments. I remember at the time wondering how that felt to you. Well, here they are again and now, because I am immersed in the lesson plans of our confirmation classes, which is called *Confirm not Conform* this seems like a really good synchronicity. These confirmation classes began with an exercise in which our young friends were asked to think about the things they have been told to believe – in other words to what things have they been told to conform? You might imagine some of the things on their list. Eventually, they will have a clearer sense of what they believe for themselves

Sometime in the last year, you may remember my talking about a very interesting thing that is happening in a great part of western Christianity. There is a move away from people being told “Believe what we tell you to believe, Behave accordingly and then you will be able to Belong.” The new thing that is happening invites people first of all to feel that they belong and then they join in the behaviors and activities of the congregation confident in their belonging and from that behaving finally a sense of what they believe emerges. The old model is turned on its head – no longer Believe, behave belong, but Belong, behave, believe. I have had some of our newer members tell me exactly that, the sense of belonging here came first. There has been no mandate about what they were told to believe in order to earn the right to belong.

In today’s lesson from Exodus, we are confronted head on with the issue of conforming. Commandments do just that—they require certain conforming behavior of us. These 10 commandments are a small portion of the 613 commandments found in the Torah – the first five books of the Bible. Not all of those commandments apply to everyone, some are for men, some for women, some for religious leaders and 200 of them are related to the Temple in Jerusalem which no longer exists. The 10 Commandments are the Cliff’s Notes of the Torah and are an outline for how a community would organize itself and have stability. People are expected to conform to such a body of laws to safeguard the fabric of society.

There is another distinction within the 613 commandments that is worth noting when we talk about conforming. The body of the law in the Torah evolved from within the Jewish community. To conform, you were expected to do certain things – the positive commandments

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like “honor your parents” and you were prohibited from doing others like stealing your neighbor’s goat. The *Talmud* is the central text of Judaism; it developed over centuries from conversations and debates among Rabbis regarding these meaning of those mitzvot – Hebrew word for commandment. The rabbis said that the laws were divided into 365 negative Mitzvot—to remind us every day of the year not do bad things—and 248 Positive Mitzvot—one for every bone in the human body, to encourage Jews to obey with their entire bodies.

This positive and negative construction is found in the 10 Commandments. Some, like *Do Not Murder*, or *Do Not Bear False Witness*, would be considered Negative Mitzvot that require conforming to a set of norms by not breaking the law. Others, like *You Shall Have No Other Gods But Me*, or *Honor your father and mother; Remember the Sabbath Day and Keep It Holy*, are Positive Mitzvot that draw us into right relationship with God and create in us the loving attitude that takes conforming to the new level of confirming.

Borrowing the wisdom of the *Confirm not Conform* lessons, conforming is defined as doing or believing something that a larger group – peers, church or society – thinks you should do or believe even though you had little, or no, voice in deciding that it was the right thing. To confirm something, however, is to make an idea your own, to believe in something and to accept responsibility for it within your own life. Confirming is mindful and heartfelt and it must ask questions. If the 1st commandment says that you shall love God – before you can confirm that, you must have some idea in your own heart and mind what it is that you are loving. You also have to really think about what loving entails? Only when you have done that can you really take something to your heart.

The work for us is always to see distinctions. Conforming is not bad. Without some level of it, we would all spiral down into anarchy. Without conforming, driving would be dangerous. We could not worship together as we do without conforming because we here conform to a structure for our liturgy while not being slaves to it. But it is generally not to the things to which we conform that we give our hearts.

When it comes to matters of faith, the ability to question and sometimes go against the grain is a good thing. Christianity has regularly been blessed by grace-filled non-conformists – starting with Jesus. Today we will bless a whole lot of animals on the Green in honor of St. Francis – one of the best non-conforming saints we have. He went against the whole grain of Christianity in his day. He said, “I cannot believe in the way the church is behaving.” I will not conform to it.” Instead he confirmed a faith that is wide and deep, based on love for every bit of creation. He confirmed the goodness of creation and the justice that flows from a faith

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dedicated to that goodness, for the small and weak and the unacceptable. Francis arrived at a place of confirmation after questioning why so much inequality existed and was it God's will? The perfect simplicity of God's creatures, the birds and lambs, the sun and the moon convinced him that conforming to and confirming that God's law of love was more important than church doctrine. He asked the church, why aren't we living more like Jesus – simply loving God and our neighbors?

Non-conforming behavior and beliefs allow us to innovate and think outside the box, to create new ways of being. This country was founded as a non-conformist social experiment – democracy and equality for all. Of course, it took later non-conformists to question the meaning of the word "all." The Episcopal Church follows the same pattern – an empowered laity makes decisions alongside of the clergy. But non-conforming thought asks questions that upset people – why shouldn't women be priests or bishops, why can't the institution of marriage survive a broader definition, are we really praying if we don't say *thee* and *thou*?

Let's go back to all of those commandments – how well do we respond to the negative ones? I think that we can conform to them but they don't call forth any sort of heart response. If you recall, Jesus said that the most important mitzvot were to love God and to love our neighbor. Simply not stealing from your neighbors because it's against the law is not nearly the same as confirming their worth, their rights, their humanity and your love for them. Ours is not meant to be a blind faith but one with our eyes open and our hearts ready to confirm all that is good and kind and hopeful. When we do that, we have the kind of faith worth believing in and we will continue to be a congregation to which people discover that they want to belong. God is good!

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