

CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD

Two weeks ago, in the first reading, God delivered his Ten Commandments to the Israelites (Ex 20:1-17). These commandments left very little room for interpretation: "You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain. You shall not covet your neighbor's house."

Many follow these commandments merely as the law instructs us — obeying the law and adhering to the letter of the law. Written in stone, the Ten Commandments prescribed a restrictive code of behavior like bumpers placed in the gutters of a bowling lane to keep the ball from falling off the lane. The Ten Commandments keep us from falling off the lane.

A goal of merely staying on the lane is like the third servant who buried his one talent; it is neither bold nor hopeful. The bumpers of the Ten Commandments may suffice for children and the immature, but limit the wise and the mature.

In today's first reading, the prophet Jeremiah describes a new covenant that will be written not in stone but on our hearts. ("The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ... I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people.")

Many Jews (and Greeks and Gentiles) came to understand that the new covenant instructs us to live beyond what is written. It instructs us to live with love to honor God. Love knows no boundaries. Justice has no limits. We must live accordingly.

Jesus exemplified love without borders. He accepted the death that awaited him. He understood that, like a grain of wheat, he must die to "produce much fruit." His death, he did not easily accept. He was "troubled now." St. Paul writes that Jesus "offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death."

The psalmist sings, "A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me." Just as Jesus prayed for a "steadfast spirit" that allowed him to learn obedience and love, we must also pray for bold confidence to throw on the lanes of boundless love and equal justice rather than limiting ourselves to avoiding the gutters.

(Based on the Readings for the Fifth Sunday of Lent)

