

Painting a Worthy Portrait

In 1947, Tom Sullivan, born prematurely, was given too much oxygen while in an incubator. Though it saved his life, it cost him his eyesight. As a young boy he found himself fenced in his back yard, but he refused to be fenced in by his blindness. Tom and his father, Porky Sullivan, invented "Sullivan's Rules" so he could play baseball with the neighborhood boys without the benefit of seeing the ball. It became the most popular game on the block.

-- <http://sullivanlive.com>

The challenge presented by the Gospel today is not unlike the challenge Tom Sullivan has been dealing with his entire life: it is how wisdom flows from the "rules" -- or the law. It's the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law.

Our challenge as disciples of Jesus is to seek the wisdom that Jesus offers us today. He points out that what is important is not just the letter of the law, which the scribes and Pharisees were obsessed with, but rather the spirit behind those precepts. Those religious leaders were arguing that Jesus was diminishing the law and the prophets, but by reaching beyond the letter of the law to the mind and will of God, Jesus was in fact broadening the scope of the law. His

often repeated command to love God and to love one another as God loves summed up for Jesus the entire law and the prophets. The scribes, Pharisees, and many of the people of that time missed that point. And often, so do we!

To be obedient to the law means embracing the underlying spirit of the law. What is so overwhelming about this principle is that it challenges us to make choices based on genuine, heartfelt discernment. So often we get trapped by the letter of the law and fail to see the spirit of the law. As Jesus points out, there is more to the commandment “Thou shall not to kill” than can possibly be contained in the words of that command. Adultery goes far deeper than one particular act. Bearing false witness goes to the very heart of all our daily interactions with others. It’s easy to memorize words, but much more difficult, and often uncomfortable, to discern their meaning in our daily lives.

When I was a youngster memorizing the Ten Commandments, I got stuck on the very first one! I couldn’t imagine myself or anyone else for that matter ever worshiping false gods. It wasn’t until my own

choices began to reveal the gods I was creating in my own life that the commandment began to painfully make sense to me.

In the 1989 Polish film *The Decalogue*, filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski presents ten, hour-long, dramatic representations of the commandments. The first, on the issue of false gods, is a story about a father so obsessed with his skill in computer technology and empirical science that he determines that a local river can withstand the weight of a person three times as heavy as his young son, and thus agrees to give him his Christmas gift of new skates, early. The results are tragic. It is only through personal discernment of choices that we can go beyond the words to the spirit of the commandments.

One of the reasons we gather around the altar of the Word and Sacrament each week is to seek and understand God's will in our lives, in other words, the spirit of the law. It requires the willingness to discern our experiences in the light of the two great commandments of loving God and our loving others as God loves. It requires an obedience to the law rooted in wisdom. We leave this Sacred Space

each Sunday prepared again to be challenged, like Tom Sullivan, to make the spirit of the rules work for us and others. The late film critic Roger Ebert summed up Kieslowski's film *The Decalogue* by asserting that the Commandments were, after all, "instructions for how to paint a worthy portrait with our lives."

That might be an appropriate reflection for the coming week: to spend some time thinking about the full meaning behind each of the Ten Commandments, seeing how they are each clearly represented in the Two Great Commandments of loving God and loving others as God loves, and finally seeing the wisdom of embracing those Commandments as "instructions for how to paint a worthy portrait with our lives."

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/cteq/dekalog-jeden/>