

See if this sounds familiar. You interview for a new job and decide to take it. You're looking forward to it, not only for the better pay, but also because you think the work is a really good fit for you. And you were right. And for the first few months everything goes as planned. You're happy. Your boss is happy.

But then something happens. Your boss starts asking you to do things that weren't part of the deal, that weren't part of the expectations that were laid out in the interview process. At first you go along, not wanting to rock the boat, and certainly not wanting to jeopardize your job. But soon frustration sets in. And bitterness. And maybe even a certain amount of anger. Eventually, you storm into your boss's office and say what you've been thinking for some time . . .

None of these things you are having me do were in the job description!
Can you recall that?

Most of us like knowing exactly what is expected when we sign on to work somewhere. Or when we begin taking a particular course in high school or college. Or when we decide to join a sports team. Or even when we get married. Many of us simply don't want any surprises, don't want new expectations to be thrown in at a later date. That just doesn't seem fair. Just tell me what I need to do or not do, right from the beginning. Don't change the rules as we go along.

I wonder if the disciples felt that way as they heard their friend Jesus elaborate on God's commandments, in the Gospel reading we just heard from Matthew. What was Jesus up to? Was Jesus changing the rules? He brings up not killing, and then starts talking about being angry at a brother or a sister. He brings up not committing adultery, and then starts talking about looking lustfully. He brings up the circumstances in which divorce is permissible, and then starts talking about the adultery that is subsequently incurred. And he brings up not lying in a legal dispute, and

then starts talking about being honest and transparent, saying “yes” when we mean “yes” and “no” when we mean “no”. In a very real sense, Jesus seemed to be taking things that were once very clear, or very black and white, and suddenly making them a little less clear, a little grayer. Why would Jesus do that?

I imagine that many of us would like the same kind of clarity in faith, and in our moral lives in particular, as we would like in other areas of our lives. We want God to tell us exactly what is expected in every situation. That way, we can just make sure we check the right boxes. Not much to think about. Not much to wrestle with. No gray areas. And not only do we often want exactly that, we probably think that’s exactly the way it “works”, probably think that’s really what formal religion is all about. It’s basically a system of “dos” and “don’ts”, coupled with some beliefs that we just simply need to accept (but which often, on the surface, don’t really demand that much from us), right?

That’s the beauty of and the slippery side of God’s “laws” - especially the Ten Commandments - simple statements we have known for most of our lives. They’re beautiful because they give us a kind of blueprint for the moral life that we are called to lead. And if we do our best to adhere to these ten demands and/or prohibitions we can be assured that we have nothing to worry about, that we are on solid ground.

But Jesus seems to be saying something else, something that might make us a little uneasy. This is sort of the slippery side of having God’s “laws” spelled out for us.

From Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel passage it seems clear that what we might think are narrow “rules” are actually much more than that. They are actually broad categories that are meant to cover large areas of our lives, and consequently are meant to inform all sorts of moral decisions that aren’t specifically mentioned. And so, it might be pretty easy not to have any other Gods, but not if those “gods” include those things in this life which have power over us, or which take priority. And it might be easy not

to steal, but not if that includes things such as other people's reputations and hopes and self-worth. And it might be pretty easy not to kill, but not if that includes wide-ranging examples such as the unborn or the aged or the environment or sacred relationships. And it might be easy not to covet, but not if that includes continually striving to get more than our fair share of the pie. I hope you get the idea.

As I often told my former parishioners, being faithful is not simply making a few right choices concerning a few big issues. Being faithful is really all about being a human being "fully human and fully alive" that is, being a person who has been truly transformed by the power of the resurrection and the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, people who are changed completely on the inside.

In other words, being a person of faith involves our whole being. It's a profound, radical way of seeing and thinking and acting, not in the ways human beings have normally done so through history, but through the lens of Jesus and his saving acts - acts which have the power to change absolutely everything, including you and me and every person with an open heart.

And so, let's try not to think of being faithful as just avoiding a few bad things or doing the occasional good thing. Rather, let's see it as embracing a whole new way of life - the life God created us to live and died to make it possible. And when we allow that to happen, there's a good chance that a lot of the decisions we have to make each and every day will become much easier, for they will flow from who we are and not simply from what the letter of the law is. Imagine what that world would look like.