

“Obedience”

Psalm 32; Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

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What has happened to “obedience?” As a frequent listener to WTNH Channel 8 News, a recent “Voice of the People” feature caught my attention. This feature plays recorded messages from callers expressing themselves anonymously on various topics.

The particular question asked listeners to respond to increased state police enforcement of tailgaters. What surprised me was the number of callers who justified their tailgating by accusing the rest of us of traveling in the passing lane (the left lane) rather than in the travel lane (the right lane). Their voices expressed what I often feel, that the tailgater is not so subtly telling us, “Get out of my way.”

My first reaction to this was to be infuriated because I am tailgated as often on local streets as I am on limited access highways. Milford, Woodbridge, Orange, Trumbull: it makes no difference. In those instances there is nowhere to go unless one pulls over—which I have done—to get out of the way. I marvel at the frenzy with which people rush to the grave.

But my second reaction was to wonder if it was me. Perhaps I am leaving too much room. I was taught “one car length for every ten miles per hour.” Since my 2005 Kia Spectra is 15 feet long, I leave 45 feet at 30 miles per hour and 90 feet—the distance from home to first base on any baseball diamond—at 60 miles per hour. Perhaps in this electronic and digital era, that’s too much space.

Nope. The Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles website, and a website that offers flash cards for drivers taking the driver’s test, both said a 3 second following rule is considered “safe.” Do you know how far a car goes in a second at 30 miles per hour? 44 feet. Which means the safe distance, if I’m doing 30 mph in town, is the distance

(1) www.ct.gov/dmv and www.flashcardmachine.com

from our front pew to our back pew. Times 3! And if I'm doing 60 mph, it's the distance from the 20 yard line to the goal line on a football field. I can imagine what you're thinking: "*Who does that?*" Right! Not even infuriated, thinking-they-are-law-abiding pastors.

Our disobedience is as old as humankind. Today's narrative from Genesis couldn't make it much clearer, and this disobedience is the original sin of which Christianity often speaks. Not a so-called "sin of the flesh." Not the nakedness of which Adam and Eve become self-aware. But disobedience. God says, "Here's the garden, folks. Till it and keep it. Eat of every tree in the garden except one." Guess which tree our ancestors ate from?

My wife Carol, with whom I read these lectionary texts each week using The Upper Room Disciplines, asked me about God's declaration that Adam and Eve would die if they ate of the fruit. They ate it, so why didn't they die right away. The Hebrew word used for "die," "muwth" (*mooth*) can mean literal or figurative death. So does it mean we lost immortality, or just innocence? Perhaps both; but most of all a relationship of trust in, and with, our Creator.

It gets better. The serpent comes sowing doubt and hesitation. Maybe God didn't say "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?" Maybe that's just what you thought God said. Note how Eve replies: "God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" You can search Genesis 2:17 until your eyes ache, but you will not find God saying "nor shall you touch it." Already Eve is taking a simple message and adding to it, making it more complicated than it needs to be, something we sometimes do when we don't want to comply.

None of this is to say that we should slavishly follow rules without questioning them or check our brains at the door. Christ came to take away our sins, not our minds. But it does truly amaze me when people will work harder at a complex act of disobedience than a simple act of obedience. Obedience acknowledges boundaries, manages expectations and leaves us free to focus our energy building on God's good gifts.

Here's a story: some of you know that my step-son, Carol's eldest son Aaron, has done well in track and field. He recently finished 13th in all New England in the 55 meter indoor hurdles and was the top high school junior finisher. His coach, Thom Jacobs, was coached by our own Wil Wright. Coach Jacobs is an excellent coach. He tells his athletes they are gentlemen first, scholars second, and athletes third. He is a passionate teacher with high standards and the expectation of obedience. As such, his intensity can sometimes be intimidating.

Carol and I experienced this last spring when we went to an outdoor meet. While watching the meet and in front of all the competing teams and the spectators, we suddenly watched Coach Jacobs cross the field yelling. He was loud and spoke to one single racer: "Tuck in that jersey! Do not leave that jersey hanging out! I told you how to dress and you will dress the way I tell you to dress! This is not your prom!" By that time he had reached the grandstands and, seeing Carol and I, he stepped up next to us. Being a bit apprehensive and not knowing what to expect from Coach, he continued in a completely different tone and, without missing a beat, said calmly, "So, Aaron is racing very well!"

Why was Coach Jacobs so upset at this other young man? It may be that he was annoyed at the disobedience and disrespect, and perhaps this was not the first offense. But most importantly, this jersey that hung down covered the young man's racing number. When a racing number is obscured one can be disqualified. Not only would the young man lose the event, but the track TEAM might miss the chance to gain the points it might have gotten, hurting their chance to win.

Obedience also helps us avoid overthinking. For some families, every Sunday is a battle: do we go to church or not? The household I grew up in simply went to church. It was non-negotiable. When we left home, that was up to us. Until then, we weren't allowed to decide whether we'd go to school so we weren't going to be allowed to decide about church, either.

One such battle unfolded between mother and daughter. “I don’t want to go to church,” she cried. “But honey,” replied mom, “we have to go to church.” Answered the daughter, “Give me three reasons I should go to church.” “Well,” mom replied, “it’s what we do. It’s Sunday, and we go to church. Second, they love you down there. If you’re not there they will miss you and ask me where you are. Third, you are 42 years old and the pastor of the church.”

Obedience extends beyond ritual practice, of course, to the essence of who we are and Whose we are. Jesus’ obedience arsenal against temptation is expressed in three important ways:

First, he was obedient to God’s leading. This is no small thing. The passage from Matthew begins “*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*” We all want to be led by God, as long as God’s leading is to comfort and peace. But what about when it is to wilderness and temptation?

Second, Jesus was obedient to his understanding that he was God’s son, the Beloved. This declaration at his baptism immediately preceded his temptation in the wilderness. It stayed with him, and Jesus was not distracted when the Adversary said “***If*** you are the Son of God....” Jesus knew who and Whose he was.

Third, Jesus was obedient to scripture. Three times Satan tried to take Jesus off his godly course, and each time Jesus reaches deep into scripture to be faithful to God’s calling. Jesus knew the texts of his faith and used them as power and resistance in the time of trial.

Lent has begun: a time for reflecting again on our rebellion and disobedience against the best God would have us be. It is a time when we can choose obedience to a loving God with high expectations and hopes for us. A time when, considering the example of Jesus, we listen for God’s leading, know our identity as beloved sons and daughters of the Most High God, and call upon spiritual resources, particularly Scripture, to ward off temptation as we seek fidelity to the love, sacrifice, service and—yes—obedience that God asks of us. Amen.