

Homily based on the readings from March 17, 2024 (Jeremiah 31.31-34; Hebrews 5.7-9; John 12.20-33)

Human beings, for the most part, are not very good at following rules.

Think about how many laws we see being broken every day – just on the highways of Connecticut: people exceeding the speed limit, following other cars too closely, sending text messages while driving, passing on the right-hand side, and so on. Most of these infractions are inconsequential, except in the rare and tragic instances when they lead to serious injury or death.

One could easily make the case that rule-breaking is as old as humanity itself. Adam and Eve, our primal ancestors, managed to violate the one and only commandment God had given them in the Garden of Eden.

Their son Cain broke the most sacred rule of all, when he murdered his innocent brother Abel. Through the generations, God's chosen people – the nation of Israel – repeatedly violated the terms of the covenant God had made with them. No sooner had God delivered them from slavery

in Egypt, in fact, than they began to worship a golden calf. The situation did not improve once they reached the Promised Land. Just last week, we heard how the inhabitants of Judah:

added infidelity to infidelity,  
practicing all the abominations of the nations  
and polluting the LORD's temple  
which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

God never stopped loving the children of Israel, but he was clearly wounded by their perennial disobedience. God's fatherly longing – that he should be their God and they should be his people – could never be fulfilled, because of Israel's chronic inability to follow the basic precepts he set before them.

Today's first reading, however, foretells a radically different relationship between God and his children. God himself promises to intervene directly, to demolish the never-ending cycle of failure and disappointment:

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.

No longer will humanity be bound by a set of superficial rules that can easily be broken or ignored. The law of God will be so deeply engraved in our hearts that we can never even *conceive* of violating it.

That sounds like a lovely promise, but how can it possibly come to pass?

A better question – since this prophecy was destined to be fulfilled by Jesus Christ – is how *has* it come to pass? All we need to do is look around us, to see the devastating effects of disobedience, sin, and evil in the world. How can we say that God's law has been written upon anyone's heart?

The answer, of course, comes in the person of Christ himself. In today's Gospel, he clearly explains the key to the fundamental transformation that God is expecting from all of us:

unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies,  
it remains just a grain of wheat;  
but if it dies, it produces much fruit.

Put more simply:

Whoever loves his life loses it,  
and whoever hates his life in this world  
will preserve it for eternal life.

The strongest force in the universe – the only force that can transform selfishness into selflessness and defiance into obedience – is the unparalleled power of self-sacrificial love. We see examples of that love all around us – in martyrs who are persecuted and even die for the faith; in doctors and nurses who care for patients with highly contagious diseases; in first responders who risk their lives to safeguard their

communities; in the simple but profound ministry of parents caring for their children. That love, of course, is *supremely* embodied by Christ's own sacrifice on the Cross – but it is a love in which we are *all* called to participate.

Any time we share in the Sacraments of the Church, we are drawing ourselves closer to Christ's sacrifice. As Saint Paul reminds us “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.” In particular, the Holy Eucharist – the heavenly banquet in which we are about to partake – reconfigures us according to the pattern of Christ's suffering and death. In the words of Saint Augustine, when “we receive the Eucharist worthily, we become what we receive.” The only way to *obey* the law of God is to unite ourselves – fully and unconditionally – with Christ himself, who is both the origin and the fulfillment of that law. By living out *his* example of self-sacrifice – empowered by the transcendent gift of his Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity – we can finally take our place as the *children* God has always longed for us to be.