

“10, 9, 8...”
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
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Texts: Exodus 20 & Philippians 3

I hope I don't upset some parents with this, with many of our children and youth in worship today for World Communion Sunday, but I have to make a confession about my childhood church days. As a growing-up-in church boy, I knew the 10 commandments and knew they were important - but I have to tell you that it was the 10th commandment that always got my attention – ‘you shall not covet’- but for not a very holy reason; because in the version of the Bible we used the minister would read: ‘you shall not covet your neighbor’s house or servant or ox or...’ but then the minister wouldn’t say donkey, he (it was always a he) would say a different word for donkey - a word I’d get in trouble if I said it, but the minister got away with it in church all the time! This was pretty shocking stuff for me – by which you can tell I was a pretty sheltered child.

So – now I’ve confessed my jaded focus on the 10th commandment, and can move on with my life to give another reason to focus on this covet commandment. Although, to follow up on my childhood experience, I had a sense early on that as far as the 10 commandments went, I was actually doing pretty well. As a child my record was clean from convictions for murder or stealing, so I was good there - and I felt like I mostly covered the other commandments too without a whole lot of trouble – except...except for that last one – ‘thou shalt not covet’ (that’s how I learned it). I knew I wasn’t supposed to want other people’s stuff – but wow!, that was a hard one! That 10th commandment I broke all the time – I DID want other people’s stuff; knew I wasn’t supposed to; so I felt bad about it – that 10th commandment got me all the time. How about you?

At the book study this past Wednesday evening, my esteemed colleague Pastor Jill noted that over the last year if she had a dollar for every time I mentioned the theologian James Alison, she would be a wealthy woman. She has been very patient in my intrigue with Alison, but I am switching things up today, and instead I am referring to Rene Girard (who as Jill knows is the theologian Alison bases his work on – so she should get a dollar anyway!). Well, Rene Girard has this interesting approach to the 10 commandments – he observes that the 10th commandment is the key to looking at all the rest –

Girard starts at the 10th and go backwards to get insight about all the commandments. But to do that, first we need to explore something about 'coveting' itself.

In my struggles with the 10th commandment, I clearly learned that 'covet' was a bad word – to covet something was wrong. But that's not right, really. The word 'covet' actually just means desire: it can and most often is used with a negative connotation – to want what is someone else's, to be desperate for it; but you'll still hear sometimes the vestiges of it simply meaning 'desire' – you'll find: 'we covet your presence at this event' or even 'we covet your prayers' is something you'll come across occasionally. 'To covet' is at its core simply to want something – desire.

So with that in mind, look at the 10th commandment – it's crucial to realize what it does say and what it doesn't. It DOES say 'do not covet/desire your neighbor's stuff' – that's very clear. Have you wondered why – why that command? – because desire is bad, to want things is bad, and we must feel bad about ourselves for our bad desires? Well, not really. The insight that Rene Girard offers is that the reason for this command is that when your primary desire is focused on those around you, then you inevitably set yourself up over-against your neighbor – you are in competition with, and even want to be, your neighbor, instead of yourself. Perhaps that is more or less of a serious issue depending on the situation, but the thing is that if you start to work your way backwards through the commandments – 9, 8, 7, 6 – prohibitions about deceit, about taking of property and destruction of relationship and of life itself – they can all be seen as the result of warped desire about another – needing to take or have from someone else as the focus of your heart. And then as you continue back further through the commandments you can track a turn towards positive desire – for family, for Sabbath, for God – a contrast with that 10th command.

Which leads precisely to pointing out what the 10th commandment does NOT say. It does NOT say 'you shall not covet' – it says 'do not covet your neighbor's stuff' – but 'do not covet' is not the point at all; rather it is to covet/desire in a way that leads not to tearing down life but to building it up. Over the centuries the wisdom of the faithful has been to take the 'do not's' of the 10 commandments and express them in proactive ways ('do not steal' – 'do be generous'; 'do not murder' – 'do value life'). And

in the case of 'do not covet your neighbor's stuff', it turns out the opposite is 'do covet...' – and to complete that thought, let's turn to Philippians.

In the passage we heard today from Philippians, one way to hear it is Paul unwinding and reclaiming what we see going on in the 10th commandment. Paul begins with all the ways he could compare himself to others – and in an odd twist this is a comparison about religious purity – but even though it is religious, this is still a coveting of his neighbor – it is Paul defining himself over against and above others; it is the religious Paul coveting a warped piety. But then Paul speaks about his conversion to a different way of faith – a shift within him to desire the way of Christ, which he describes in this way: sharing in the power of Christ's resurrection and in the suffering of his death. And what I hear in that is Paul seeing himself defined by God's claim of life in the midst of all that is death-dealing. Paul covets resurrection as the power that shapes his living: to live in the faith that life is claimed by the living God: 'Christ has made me his own', Paul says.

I think that gives us the flipside, the proactive side, of that 10th command. A life of faith is not the tamping down of desire, it is the freedom given by God to desire life and create wholeness – in the midst of a broken world it is freedom from fear and despair, into love of God and of neighbor and of self. The commandments in Exodus were given by the God of the Exodus – the LORD who frees from bondage and who frees into fullness of life. As we share this Exodus/Passover/ communion meal, we covet what is offered here by our Lord: to share in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, that our hearts may be shaped by the desire of a God who loves and claims us as God's own; by the Risen Lord who nourishes our hearts to desire community with our neighbors and in our world – feeding a desire for wholeness, a passion for justice, the pursuit of beauty and joy. What is nourished in us at this table is a truly human desire that is passion for true life: the ways of life God has freed us to and calls us again this day to follow.

At the last supper, Jesus said to his disciples: 'I have earnestly desired to share this Passover meal with you' - our Lord covets our presence at this feast of love and hope; the Risen Christ claiming you as his own to love God and neighbor not only as a command, but as your heart's true desire - come for all things are now ready. Amen.