

November 10, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

Mission from the Heart

TEN COMMANDMENTS:

“Thou Shalt Not Covet”

Mark 10:17-23; Exodus 35: 21-22; 36-2-7

David A. Renwick

In our sermons through the fall we are looking together at the Ten Commandments, the Commandments given by God to his servant Moses, and through Moses to the people of Israel after they had escaped from slavery in Egypt, heading on their way across the Red Sea through the desert, on their way to the land that God had promised them. These same Commandments have been preserved in scripture in the 20th chapter of Exodus and in the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy so that they would be passed on from generation to generation, not only to the people of Israel, but to everyone who believes in the God of Israel and in our Lord Jesus Christ. As we heard in our scripture reading from Mark, Chapter 10, Jesus himself embraced these Commandments and passed them on to his disciples; and they've been passed down to us, his followers today, from generation to generation. Indeed, they have formed the foundation of every society that has in any sense called itself Christian from that day to this.

These commandments are not intended to tell us what to do precisely in every part of life, but they are intended, rather like our United States Constitution, to provide the boundaries, the parameters, the arena of discussion within which we have to think about our relationships with God and with one another. Like our Constitution, the Ten Commandments form the springboard from which all of our ethical thinking about community to life together in the sight of God stems.

So far we've looked at six of these Commandments.

- We began by looking at the first two Commandments, which focus our attention on God and our relationship with God. If we don't get our relationship with God right, right from the outset, then it's not worth going on to the others. *Where is God in our life? Is God our first priority?* That's the challenge set for us in the first Commandment. And then, the challenge of the second commandment is to make us ask: *Who is God in our lives? How do we think about God? How do we imagine God? What is the image of God that we have in our minds?* So we looked at the first two Commandments.
- Last Sunday (Communion of Saints Sunday) we looked at the Fifth Commandment, which tells us to “Honor Father and Mother.” So we thought together about families – the family of God and our own families, and also generations within families. Sometimes there's a disconnect between generations and this Commandment says “*Let there be no disconnect. One generation is to honor another and the other is to return the favor.*” We're bound

together from generation to generation, the family, the local family and the extended family. The community matters to God and how we treat each other within that community.

- We looked some weeks ago now at the Sixth Commandment, which specifically forbids adultery; but the assumption behind the commandment is the inviolable nature of marriage and the importance of any relationships that are bound together by covenant commitment. In marriage, or in other relationships too, we make promises that God intends for us to keep!! And even though promises get broken, and we find we cannot keep them (we are all “Plan B” people in some way, shape or form), we nevertheless hold to this central principle of relationships within society as a whole and within the most intimate setting: covenant promises are to be made and kept. Lose that framework and society (and indeed I believe our joy) begins to fall apart.
- And then, we considered the Commandment not to murder – which to Jesus is not just about the literal taking of life, but about the sanctity of life and the daily importance of healthy human relationships.
- And we looked, too at the Commandments on theft, which assumes the existence of private property. Without private property there is no such thing as theft! The Puritans who established much of the ethos of our nation looked on this Commandment as a foundation for the economic and social life of the nation: *Justifying the fact that what you have is yours. It's okay to seek your own wealth. But you are not to do it, to the exclusion of your concern for the wealth of another.* And so we have the term 'commonwealth', (stemming from our theological forefathers in the 1500's and the 1600's) used to describe the various colonies and states: the “Commonwealth” of Massachusetts or Virginia or Pennsylvania or Kentucky, and so forth – because of this belief that our individual wealth has been given to us by God but is to be used not just for ourselves but for the common good. And the commandment is kept, positively, when we seek the wealth of all and ensure that everyone has a share in God's economy.

So these are the Commandments that we've looked at so far and we come this morning to the 10th Commandment, the last of the Commandments, "**You shall not covet.**"

- If the Commandment on *theft* is something that takes place physically and outwardly, and can be observed and legislated, because it's an outward manifestation of what we do,
- then the Commandment about *covetousness* is about the inner life and it cannot be legislated; no Judge can look and see our motives except for God . . . before whom (as the Episcopal prayer book puts it) “no thoughts are hidden and no secrets are hid.”

So here is a Commandment which tells us explicitly that God is interested in our hearts, in the very core of our being; not just our actions (whether legal or illegal; whether good or bad, whether obeying the commandments or breaking them) but our thoughts and motives. God is interested in what precedes the keeping or breaking of the commandments – when we break many of the Commandments it's because something has taken place prior to the actual outward

manifestation; something has gone wrong in our inner life which leads us to the breaking of that outer Commandment. The Commandment about covetousness, takes us to the inside of life.

- If we steal, we usually steal because we've coveted something ahead of time.
- If we commit adultery it's because we've coveted (lusted after) a person ahead of time.

Covetousness is about desiring what is not ours. Covetousness is about being consumed by what we do not have, by what we wish we could have, by what we think will bring us satisfaction, often by what we believe is owed to us but that we do not yet have, and so we grab for it, as if it will bring us satisfaction. Covetousness has the power to break down all of our moral resolve when it gets out of hand, when there is so much going on inside us that it becomes out of control, and the “outside law,” even at times when we know it to be good, begins to decrease in importance to us, and then vanish and disappear. And all because *we allow ourselves to think that when we get what we want we will be happy.*

Trouble is, it just doesn't always work out that way. It certainly didn't in the first story in the Bible, the story of Adam and Eve and Garden of Eden (Genesis 1-3). In that story God is a good and a gracious God who creates the universe and places his creatures, made in his image, in a garden, a paradise. This is what God wants for his people – God wants their (and our) ultimate happiness. This is God's passion for you and me. He places these beings in this paradise and he says to them first (and many people forget this), “You may eat freely of all the trees that are in the garden” (Genesis 2:16): You may desire them. You may take them. They are for you. They will make you happy. This is what I want for you. But there is this tree, one fruit, which is out of bounds. It will not make you happy. It will bring you death. Don't eat it: “If you eat the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you will die” (Genesis 2:17).

So God is good, and clear: Everything is there for your good, except this tiny little exception, one tree, one fruit, which if you try it, if you covet it, and act on your covetousness, will lead to your death. And what happens to those who have gone before us? And what happens in your and my own experience? We, like them, tend to zero in on those things that we do not have, and cannot have, as if something is missing, or is being taken from us. And when this happens, all the other commandments begin to tumble too. The story of Adam and Eve tells the truth about us as well:

- They begin to doubt the truthfulness of God. They break the ninth commandment: they bear false witness against God as if the God who is good is evil, and is holding back from them something that will bring them happiness.
- And then they ignore God. God had said don't do it. They ignore God. They break the First Commandment. They take the fruit forbidden by God.
- They turn God into their enemy and they turn the fruit that they have taken into their God. They break the second commandment and become idolaters. And everything from that moment to this becomes twisted and turned upside down and inside out.
- They pursue a path that promises them life, but ends up with death. They break the sixth commandment. They “kill” their relationship with God, they kill their relationship with

each other, they bring death to their own souls. And within a generation, literal murder enters the world (Genesis 4).

And we see this story being played out not only “in the beginning,” but we see it being played out within the stories of scripture and within stories told outside of scripture as well: covetousness, promising much but delivering little. Or worse, delivering death. You see it in the stories of Shakespeare.

One story in particular comes to mind. It's the story of **Macbeth and Lady Macbeth**. And Macbeth wants something, which is not wrong in itself; he wants to be the King of Scotland. (Well, it's not a bad thing to want to be the King of Scotland is it?) He wants to be the King of Scotland. But somebody has to die if that's going to happen. And the death takes place: King Duncan is killed. And Macbeth and Lady Macbeth *get what they want, but they don't*. Indeed, Lady Macbeth cries out (Act 3, Scene 2):

“Naught's had, all's spent, Where our desire is got without content.

Tis safer to be that which we destroy Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.”

In other words, “We've done everything, we've given in to our desire. We get what we desire, but without joy or contentment.”

So you see it within Shakespeare. You see it within scripture as well.

Perhaps the most famous story of covetousness leading to “getting something but getting nothing” is the story of **King David** committing adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Adultery starts with lust, which is nothing other than covetousness.

Here is this king of ancient Israel. He should be at the battlefield with his armies but he's not. He's in his house, in his palace in Jerusalem, and there overlooks the city and sees this gorgeous woman, Bathsheba, and he covets this woman. Her husband, Uriah, is away on the battlefield fighting David's battles. He is where David ought to be, one of David's most courageous soldiers. But David puts all that aside in his mind. He knows what he wants and he is going to get what he wants. And he does. He gets Bathsheba and has Uriah placed in the battlefield where he will almost certainly die. And he does: Uriah, this courageous man serving his king, is turned by David's covetousness into an impediment, a mere obstacle in his way, and David gets rid of him. So he commits not only adultery but (even if by the hand of another) murder. Covetousness leads to the breaking of one Commandment after another. He gets what he wants but his kingdom and family begin to unravel from that point on. Having taken what he wants, he loses much else. His relationship with God destroyed. His relationship with others destroyed. His relationship with his own soul destroyed.

There's another story in the Old Testament about another king, which is less familiar but perhaps just as important and maybe even more important. It's a story about King Ahab. You can find this in First Kings, Chapter 21, and it takes place in the ninth century before Christ.

King Ahab, is not one of the best kings by any means of ancient Israel, indeed he's one of the worst. And there's a piece of property that he wants. Just think how tense property and land issues can become – whether it's property development here at home, or struggles for land that are going on in the Middle East today. Well, King Ahab looked out from his palace and he surveyed his property

beyond his palace and it was all contiguous except for one little piece of land, a vineyard, which was like an island within his land. And he said to himself, "That doesn't belong to me and it needs to belong to me." It belonged to a man call Naboth, and Ahab wanted to get it. To begin with his desire in a sense was quite reasonable: he was willing to pay money in order to get this vineyard from Naboth; but Naboth wasn't about to sell the land which had been in his family for generations. To Naboth the land was not about money but about heritage and family and home.

But the King doesn't want to take "no" for an answer. The desire he has in his mind will not go away and it grows and it grows and it grows. It becomes covetousness, a desire so strong that he will do anything to get what he does not have. He complains about the situation to his wife and the two of them collude and plot together against Naboth, spreading lies, bearing false witness, stirring up a crowd until Naboth is put to death and the King marches in and takes the land away.

He gets it. He gets the land, but like David, from that moment on, his kingdom begins to unravel. He gets the land. But as those great theologians, the Rolling Stones would say, *'he doesn't get any satisfaction. He tries and he tries and he tries and he tries, but he gets no satisfaction.'* The covetousness, which has been stirred up in his heart and in his life, promises much but delivers little. Indeed, it only brings death, whether literally or figuratively: Death in his relationship with God, death in his relationships with others, and death in his own soul and well-being. Nothing promised is received.

On one occasion a man comes up to Jesus, we read in our gospel account in Mark, Chapter 10, and he is concerned with his soul. He knows that there is no life in his soul. He comes up to Jesus and he asks him about eternal life. "What do I need to do to get eternal life?" His question is not only, *"What do I need to do in order to live when I die?"* But *"What do I need to do to have the kind of life which has the quality of eternity about it right now, beginning now and continuing through death on into eternity? What do I need to do? There is something missing in my life."*

This would be a man who would appear on the outside to have everything together, a moral man, an upright man, everything going his way. But he knows that there's something on the inside, which is wrong, which is missing, which isn't there.

So he comes up to Jesus and he asks him this question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus replies with a question: "have you embraced the Ten Commandments?"

And Jesus mentions some of them specifically: *"You know the Commandments, 'You shall not murder', 'You shall not commit adultery', 'You shall not steal', 'You shall not bear false witness', 'You shall not defraud', 'Honor your father and mother.'"*

And the man says, *"Yes. Teacher I have kept these since I was young."* As if to say, *"I know them and I keep them. I live my life by them. But there is still this emptiness inside."*

And then the Gospel account goes on and says to us, *'Jesus, looking at him loved him.'* And it needs to say that because what Jesus then goes onto say doesn't sound like love at all! Jesus looking at him loved him and said, *"You lack one thing. Go sell what you own and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. And then come, follow me."*

When the man heard this, we read, *"he was shocked and went away grieving. For he had many possessions."*

Jesus looked at him and loved him and then tells him to give it all away and the man cannot do it. We may have to ask ourselves, why did Jesus say this? Why did he say this to this man? Why did he make this man cry? Why did he make this man grieve? Why did he make this man leave disappointed? Because he didn't love him? No! Mark tells us quite deliberately and explicitly that Jesus *did* love him; Jesus spoke out of love! . . . yet with a sharpness that was like the blade of a surgeon – cutting into the man precisely because he could see what the man could not see: that there was at least one commandment (and maybe more!) that the man was failing at miserably. With the eyes of God Jesus could see that the man was a 'coveter' who deeply loved his possessions more than he loved God; that he trusted in his possessions more than he trusted in God, depended on these possessions for his sense of "who he was" and for his security more than he depended on God. And Jesus, in love, realized that the man could never find what he was looking for, filling that hole within his life, unless he dealt with that inner love, that inner covetousness, first of all. Theologian Reinhard Hütter puts it like this (*Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics*, p. 47, quoted in *The Ten Commandments*, by Patrick Miller, WJK, 2009, p.407):

The Commandments stubbornly keep our desires directed towards God. To be clear, desire as such is not the problem, it is not bad. Indeed, we are created as creatures with desires. To be human is be desiring. All of our desires, however are created to come to a rest in their ultimate good, which is communion with God. If other creative things are elevated to the position of the ultimate good of they're elevated to the position of God, then coveting in the unavoidable results, since none of these created things will ultimately bring our desiring to a rest. Without desire, we would cease to be human. Without God as desire's ultimate end, we become inhumane.

So Jesus, the skillful physician, cuts the skin, opens the wound to lance it, to let the poison out. But before he can do it this man says "*Ouch, don't touch me there. It's too painful, it's too hard. I will not let you in.*" and leaves sorrowful.

Now let's be clear. Jesus doesn't ask everybody to give away everything they have. There are many people who have wealth in the gospel stories and who keep their wealth. Jesus doesn't ask them to give everything away. BUT what Jesus *does* ask from everyone, without exception, is to enter our lives into places where no one else sees, to enter into those private places and desires onto which we hold and on which we depend and says, "*Let me in, because I cannot heal you unless you do. I cannot be a physician in your life. I cannot give you the life that you want unless I get into the root of the problem. Let me in. Let me shine my laser light, painful though it may be at first, into that place which needs healing, so that you can have the life for which you were created.*"

If we don't allow him in, then it's almost certain that all kinds of covetousness, some of which we are not aware of, some of which we are, will control everything else we do; the inside will control the outside. But the great physician says to us, "*Come to that point of repentance, where you open the door and let me in to change your ways from being a getter, from being a grabber, from being a coveter, to being a grateful and generous giver.*"

. . . and this is the picture we see, this positive picture of life as God intended it to be, in the passage in Exodus 35 with which the sermon began; a positive story about what happens when covetousness is taken away and the grace of God fills that part of our lives that we try to satisfy with everything else.

Remember the passage? The people of Israel are in the desert – a group of sinners, a group of grabbers, a group of coveters who are known for not doing what God wants, but somehow, when they are commanded to build a space of worship for God, they rise to the occasion. At this point the Spirit of God enters into them and we are shown this simply marvelous scene in which everyone gets caught up in acts of generosity:

Everyone whose heart was stirred and everyone whose spirit was willing brought the Lord's offering to be used for the tent of meeting, for God's work, for the manifestation of God on Earth. Moses then called Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful one to whom the Lord had given skill. Everyone whose heart was stirred to come to do the work and they received from Moses all the offerings that the Israelites had brought for doing the work that the sanctuary and our work is the work of the sanctuary. They came each from the task being performed and said to Moses, "The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work that the Lord has commanded us to do." So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp: "No man or woman is to take anything else, make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary."

How amazing! "Stop your giving!" The hole in their life, their emptiness on which covetousness thrives, has been filled and they now are overflowing with gratitude to God, and Moses says, "Stop it, stop it. You're giving too much. We don't know what to do with it. God's work is flourishing."

And that is surely where we want to be, too. In that place where God has filled us. Where we're not listening any more to the Covetousness Commandment but to the "Hold it back commandment!" because we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and might, and that love and contentment spontaneously overflows to others.

You shall not covet. God is interested not only in the outside, but the inside.

And when the inside is right, all kinds of good things can overflow from our lives in the name of God, for this world which God loves, and to which he sent his son.

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4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800