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First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
November 16, 2014 - Stewardship Commitment Sunday
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Words to the Wise: A Sermon Series on the Ten Commandments VIII. "Earthen Altars": A Stewardship Sunday Reflection

Exodus 20:17, 22-24 The Message No lusting after your neighbor's house - or wife or servant or maid or ox or donkey. Don't set your heart on anything that is your neighbor's....God said to Moses, "Give this Message to the People of Israel: 'You've experienced firsthand how I spoke with you from Heaven. Don't make gods of silver and gods of gold and then set them alongside me. Make me an earthen Altar. Sacrifice your Whole-Burnt-Offerings, your Peace-Offerings, your sheep, and your cattle on it. Every place where I cause my name to be honored in your worship, I'll be there myself and bless you.'"

On this the final of the sermon series on the Ten Commandments we can think back to what we have seen and learned about these "words to the wise" delivered to Moses so long ago. We have seen that while the Hebrew people had, of course, had their start with the covenant made to Abraham and Sarah, by the time they had been in Egypt for 400 years and under the lash of Egyptian oppression they had nearly forgotten who God was and had to be introduced. We were thereby reminded that sometimes, we too, under the stress and cares of life can seem to forget about God and instead put our trust in other things, or, like the Hebrew people, anxiously awaiting Moses' return from Mt. Sinai, can be tempted to make God into the image of something else and thereby forget that God is a friend to be trusted and not a bully to be placated. We have seen that God's imperative that we take a day of rest, a sabbath, is to remind us not to get so caught up in the minutiae and to-do lists of life that we fail to exercise that first of all the spiritual disciplines: to simply pay attention to the wonder that surrounds us. We have seen the sobering truth that if one cannot acknowledge, for good and not-so-good, the huge role and place that parents have that we will find it hard to most fully live out God's purpose for our lives and we will be less likely to become ourselves better parents. We have seen that the prohibitions on murder and stealing are not such "minimalist" requirements and we might initially think and, at the

same time, that they are only the beginning of a life that is truly abundant. We learned that that prohibition of lying is actually also the imperative to us to always seek to defend and uphold the reputation of our neighbor.

And today we come to the end of this list on this our annual stewardship Sunday, and are reminded simply from reading that tenth commandment of how very different in some ways our lives are from those ancient Hebrews and how, therefore, we must be careful in our reading and appropriating these words for our own very different twenty-first century lives? What do I mean? Well, while most of us have a house or a place to live, and many of us have a spouse, some of the rest of the language doesn't much seem to speak to us. I mean, if I wanted to lust after having your donkey, I'm not sure that any of you here have a donkey that could be the object of my hopes. And how many of you have a servant or a personal maid that you are glad that this commandment protects? Nonetheless, the words that frame these culture-and-time-dependent items – which the more traditional translations render as “do not **covet** your neighbor's house or spouse or anything else that is your neighbor's” – are ones that we need to both take to heart and to wrestle with their meaning.

The first thing I notice in this regard is that actually if everyone obeyed this commandment our culture would look rather different, wouldn't it?!? For, as one preacher puts it,

...we live in a society that **wants** us to be covetous. We live in a society, a consumer, materialist culture that says greed is good. Covetousness is normal. Do more of it. You don't have to have your television set on for more than ten minutes to realize that your society **wants** you to covet. It **wants** you to have things that you don't have now. It **wants** you to be fixated on getting those things

that you don't have now.¹

He's right, isn't he? And yet when you and I adopt that sort of covetousness as our value, when we give in to this sort of seductive siren song, we run a huge risk. I can put that risk no better than does a preacher by the name of Ann Hines who offers these very wise word of warning: the tenth commandment acknowledges

...our vulnerability to envy and greed – to always thinking we don't have enough – that someone else has more than they deserve, while we have less. And ... the danger in that [is that by] coveting what someone else has, we ...risk bitterness towards ourselves, towards the other person, and even towards our God.... and we prevent ourselves from being truly happy [by] ...believing that what brings happiness is filling our lives with more and more stuff....²

Do you recall the parable that Jesus told about the rich man who had so much stuff that he decided to tear down his barns and build new and bigger barns so as to hold all his stuff? Do you remember what Jesus said to him? "You fool! This night your life will be demanded of you." But I much prefer the insightful translation of Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for it fits so well with the Tenth Commandment's wisdom; Barbara says that Jesus' response can just as faithfully be translated as "You fool! This day your stuff demands your life"

It's too often true, isn't it? We buy something and notice our friend has the newer version and we covet it – and our stuff is ruling our lives and not vice versa. We get a promotion and a raise and we soon realize that a co-worker is making more money than we are and we envy and begin to obsess on that difference and scheme how to match him or her - our stuff is ruling our lives and not vice versa. Do you know

¹<http://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-tenth-commandment-no-coveting--2>
Emphases mine.

²<http://www.emersonuuc.org/worship/sermons/The%20Commandment%20Series.pdf>

the story of the American missionary to a very poor country in the third world who returned to the United States and visited the churches that were supporting her? At one of the congregations, after telling her story and the story of the people of her village and congregation overseas, one man came up to her, visibly moved, and said “It must be so difficult for you and your people to be faithful in living for Jesus when there is such poverty and need all around you and you have had to give up so much. Our church will certainly be praying for you.” She responded “Thank you. But when my congregation looks at the incredible over-abundance of things and stuff all around you, we know just how hard it must be for **you** to stay faithful in living for Christ. My church will be praying that **you** do not yield to the temptation of too much stuff and too many things.”³ That story helps remind me of both the opportunities and challenges of being a Christian in this culture and of the need to indeed seek to honor the tenth commandment so as to not give in to that envy and bitterness that can distract us from our relationship with and call from God.

And yet the word “covet” is not necessarily a bad one in and of itself. While it might be a rather stuffy way to talk, you can tell someone that you would covet the opportunity to have lunch and get to know them better. You can covet the opportunities to better yourself through more time to read or reflect or pray. You can covet the chance to have more time to spend with family, friends, church. And, as one pastor puts it, coveting the right things “can motivate us to change our situation, to move forward in life, to...see and reach for possibilities offered by God’s creation....”⁴ Where “coveting” turns the wrong way, though, is, as we have seen, when the object of your desire is at the expense of someone else. Nothing more illustrates that in this time of

³Adapted from
<http://faith2face.wordpress.com/2013/04/29/sermon-covetousness-the-loving-desire-of-things/>

⁴Anne Cohen, quoted in
<http://www.emersonuuc.org/worship/sermons/The%20Commandment%20Series.pdf>

year than the sad annual stories of those who start standing in line on Thanksgiving for Black Friday sales and end up in fistfights or worse with those others who are in line and who are also coveting the chance to have something and thereby take the opportunity away from someone else at whatever the cost.

Just as we saw with the commandment about lying – that not lying is actually also the opportunity to behave even better than that requires by always seeking to uphold and honor the reputation of others around you – the commandment not to covet also has implications that go beyond this negative way of expressing. Now, to be sure, if folks were to heed this commandment the world would be a better place, but this morning I want you to imagine with me what might happen if folks were able to not only heed this commandment, but to go beyond it. What would that look like? One scholar of the Hebrew language points out that the word “covet” means to want something “with so much longing that we feel we’ll never be complete and whole without it.”⁵ When that longing is for stuff, or is fueled by envy for someone else’s state, then the result is less than God hopes. But, again, what would happen if we coveted things not **from** our neighbors but **for** our neighbors, and we coveted those things for them with such an intensity of longing that we don’t feel complete? I mean:

- What if we coveted **for** our neighbors that more and more of them would know what we know of God’s gracious goodness and gentle love that is for each and all, rather than the God too many have been told is a harsh judge just waiting to punish.
- What if we coveted **for** our neighbors that there is a church where they truly are welcome, a church that knows that the way you dress, your ethnicity, your orientation, your tattoos and piercings matter not one whit to the church or to God?

⁵<http://www.emersonuuc.org/worship/sermons/The%20Commandment%20Series.pdf>

- What if we coveted **for** our neighbors that the church was so well-resourced that it could have IHN week many times a year to show our care to the “least of these”?
- What if we coveted **for** our neighbors that more and more of them would know the church as a safe place to bring their children to learn of the love of God under the care of wonderful role models?
- What if we coveted **for** our neighbors that they would know a church that took such joy in giving and in outreach and in mission that the coffers of ESM and Tennyson Center and Urban Peak and Springs Rescue Mission and Humane Borders and Tessa overflowed with the love that was poured out from that church?

And it is with *that* sense of coveting and with such dreams that our scripture for today connects with our opportunity for today. For on this Stewardship Sunday, at the offering time, you will have your opportunity to make your pledge of financial support to the mission and ministry of this church in 2015. And let me say a line that will cause our finance folks to gulp: do not pledge because the church needs the money. For while that is true, the deeper, more important, more urgent truth is that our neighbors whom we are called to serve need the ministry that God continues to call us to do. Give your gifts and make your pledges because you covet, indeed, what we can do together as we continue to grow in people, in resources, in – as our mission statement says – “radical hospitality, joyfulness in generosity, and service to God and neighbor.” Moreover, let me say this to those who may be visiting today, perhaps for the first time: We are glad that you are here and this annual stewardship emphasis is something that we do not because we have to but because we want to and because we take joy in the opportunity to be generous. **Your** gift today, though, is your presence with us.

In today's scripture, I included a kind of "coda" that is not usually printed when the Ten Commandments are listed; did you hear it? "Make me," God says, "an earthen Altar.... [and] Every place where I cause my name to be honored in your worship, I'll be there myself and bless you." In the history of the Jewish and Christian people, an altar is simply the place where we focus our attention on God and where we bring those things that are most valuable to us and those things that we most want God to bless and prosper and lay them on that altar. That's your opportunity and mine today: to bring before God and place on the altar our hopes for how we can be even more effective in responding to the hopes God has for us, to dedicate to God the best of our time, talent, and treasure that we might thereby evidence how being God's people has made all the difference in our lives, and to show, indeed, how we covet for this world God loves that ever more of our neighbors might know the amazing grace that finds us, keeps us, loves us as we are but loves us too much to ever leave us where we are. For that God, and for that opportunity let us offer our thanks and our praise. Amen.