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Words to the Wise: A Sermon Series on the Ten Commandments II. Idols and Inheritances

Exodus 20:4-6 (CEB) Do not make an idol for yourself - no form whatsoever - of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the Lord your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

John 9:1-3 (The Message) Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?" Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do."

James 1:13 (The Message) Don't let anyone under pressure to give in to evil say, "God is trying to trip me up." God is impervious to evil, and puts evil in no one's way.

The most predictable way to preach a sermon on the Second Commandment would probably be to note the prohibition against making idols to worship, and then noting that while you and I don't craft for ourselves things that we then worship and bow down to, we nonetheless have a tendency to give certain things in our lives far more authority, far more of our time and attention and energy than is warranted. Seen that way, every one of us probably has an idol that sometimes sneaks into our lives every so often: for some folks, their implicit idols are sports, evoking from them far more energy and attention and time than their families, their jobs, their church, their God, giving credence to comedian Dave Barry's observation that it is puzzling how some grown men who can't remember which one of their children has asthma can nonetheless become deeply agonized for seventeen weeks over a perfect stranger's hamstring problems. For others, the idol that they sometimes find camped out in their living room is the idol of "self-care" – that sometimes insidious shibboleth of our age, an idea that in

its extreme is neither Biblical nor ethical, that you always ought to “look out for number one” first and foremost and that purchases of the newest electronics or those smelly bath salts or those season tickets need no justification because you’re simply “taking care of yourself.” So predictable or not, it is indeed true that each of us is prone to making idols that we sometimes give more attention – even ultimate attention - than is warranted; each of us is indeed prone fitting the definition of idolatry that one preacher gives: “Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth.”¹

However, what I am more interested in this morning is why and how that happens, and to think about that we need to take a closer look at the first line of the Second Commandment and in particular the word that is translated as “idol.” Now, this word can just as easily and accurately be translated as “image,” and about half of the translations I consulted seem to do so. And while translating it that way has sometimes lead to sad excesses – as when certain folks during the Protestant reformation in the 16th century gleefully destroyed all kinds of art in Catholic churches – there is something very important about the linkage between “images” and “idols.” For you see, while it is important – in fact, it is crucial – to use our words well to describe who God is and what God is like, the reality is that images are also crucial and I daresay that every one of us has an image, a picture of God in our mind that can color our thinking and our actions and which can lead, indeed, to giving something power – in this case, a false image of God – that never should have had that power and which can lead to much misery.

Some of you may have heard the story bout the little girl who was drawing a picture, and someone asked her what she was drawing. She said, “I'm drawing a picture of God,” and the person responded, “Well, honey, you can't do that.” She said, “Why not?” “Well, no one knows what God looks like.” The little girl then said, “Well,

¹http://www.westminsterdayton.org/pdf_sermons/2012/ser012212.pdf

they will when I am finished.”² We may not know what God is like, but I have no doubt whatsoever that all of us carry an image, a picture or two of God in our minds and it is when we give over to those images power that they don’t deserve that we make an idol. What picture of God is in your mind?

- *I am haunted* to this day by a woman in my church in Hawaii who was one of the most generous and loving people I have ever known, who died painfully and much too young and even on her deathbed kept saying “I know that I did something to deserve this.” The picture, the image of God in her mind as karmic scorekeeper who sent her cancer for some secret sin just was too strongly etched to be overcome.
- *And I am frustrated* by the people whose picture of God is one that looks far more like a painting of their political party or their ideologies than anything else, who, if they are on the left, seem to portray God as the honorary chair of the ACLU and, if they are on the right, appear to depict God as the ombudsman for the NRA.
- *I shake my head* at those folks whose picture of God in their minds is one of God as their very own personal lucky charm, getting them parking places and out of speeding tickets and making sure that they and theirs are safe and who thereby never think through the hard questions of what it means with such a picture that God keeps their families safe but doesn’t apparently care so much for other families.
- *I am enraged* at the picture of God that is apparently in the mind of a very well-known para-church organization leader who more than once has told women in abusive relationships that they should put up with “getting slapped around” for a

²The story can be found in dozens and dozens of sources via Google. The one I am citing here is <http://www.sermonsearch.com/sermon-outlines/14343/the-second-commandment/>

night and then call not the police but their pastor, too many of whom have then told the woman that God wants them to stay in that relationship no matter at what cost to them or their children because the man is the “head” of the household.

- *I find it hard not to despair* at the preacher whose picture of God in his mind caused him to pen a sermon in which he equated the Second Commandment and the Second Amendment to the Constitution, somehow saying that the prohibition of idols also meant that there should be no gun safety laws and that a certain number of dead children is simply the price that God asks us to pay for “freedom.”

Oh, indeed, pictures can be powerful – particularly when they are unacknowledged – and can cause an idol to be created that looks far more like our own fears and phobias, our own xenophobias and zealotries, our own meanness or muddledness, our own bigotries and biases than they do of the God who sent God’s only Son that everyone might have life abundantly, and who wishes that no one perish.

The story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments picks back up a few chapters later in Exodus, when Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai, carrying the two tablets on which the commandments have been chiseled, and finds that in his absence his brother Aaron and the people have been overcome by their fear and worry and have taken all their gold jewelry and melted it down and fashioned it into a Golden Calf to worship. What’s fascinating to me about this story is not so much that these folks – tired, weary, scared – would give into their fears (for hasn’t each of us done the same at times?) but that the item they fashioned is not an *alternative* God, but rather **is in fact meant to be an image of Yahweh.**³ You see, they didn’t *switch* gods or create an

³I’m indebted to J. Ligon Duncan’s sermon, “The Second Commandment: No Idols,” for this exegetical point. Rev. Duncan’s words are worth citing at length: “If you look at Exodus 32 verse 4, you will see that when Aaron made that golden calf, he made that golden calf as an image of the God of Israel

alternative God, but simply couldn't stand to not have an image, a representation, a picture, if you will, of God. *But they got the picture wrong.* And so they created Yahweh in the image of one of the Egyptian "deities," one of those "gods" that had been enmeshed in, part and parcel of, a system that thrived on hatred and oppression and abuse and fear. They got the picture of Yahweh wrong because they returned to – in fashioning that calf – assumptions and understandings about God that would not give life but death and hurt. For you see, to use the fancy psychological word, they had been a part of a system of violence and cruelty and capriciousness for so long that they had "internalized" those understandings and assumptions of god, too, being violent, cruel, and capricious.

And, my friends, what happens when that happens? Well, the Hebrew people wandered their way for forty more years, seeking to purge that picture from their minds and hearts. For that's the truth of the second part of the second commandment: Indeed the the wrongful pictures we carry around about ourselves and our world and about God can do damage for generation after generation – and indeed the sins and shortcomings and tragedies of one generation live on into the next and the next and the next. For example, and as we have seen in the news yet again this week, we all know that children who are abused – emotionally, physically, or sexually – will very often replicate that behavior with their children. We all know as a society that three hundred and fifty years of slavery and a hundred years of Jim Crow have replicated for generation after generation a people whose net worth is only a fraction of that of those whose forebears weren't enslaved – to the diminishment of **everyone** in this nation. We all know that two of the most crucial predictive factors for the recurrence of juvenile

who had brought Israel out of Egypt. In other words, he wasn't saying, "Children of Israel, the God of Israel has gotten you this far, we're abandoning now. Moses on the mountain, we don't know where he is, we're switching to another brand. We are going to another god now." No, the golden calf was an image of the God who brought them out of Egypt. He was attempting to visually represent God. They wanted a god like the nations around them had, they wanted a god they could see, and touch..."

<http://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-second-commandment-no-idols--2>

delinquency over the generations are poverty and dropping out of school, and yet too often we have only sought to punish the results – like the indisputable evil that results from drugs – instead of also giving anywhere near the same energy to the causes. And so the awful and soul-stultifying pictures get painted and re-painted and the sins of one generation indeed are passed along to be re-created anew.

At this point, we must ask, though: where, in all of this is the **good news**, the gospel; where is the hope? In precisely three things:

First, as the words of the commandment say, while the effects of those wrong pictures about life, about the world, about God can indeed persist and perdure into new generations, notice that the commandment affirms with an outrageous number – one-thousand! – that God’s work and power and patient persistence to bring good out of evil never ends, never stops. “A thousand ages in Thy sight....”

Second, we can affirm this morning that it is not, in fact God, who visits these evils but that God is the one who seeks to undo them, transcend them, redeem them. As our reading from the gospel of John notes, Jesus himself dismissed the idea that that man’s blindness was caused by his parents’ sins, and simply affirmed that in the face of evil God would nonetheless always be at work. For as James put it, in our other reading, “God puts evil in no one’s way.”

Third, how many of you have ever played with an Etch-A-Sketch? How many of you have ever picked up your or children’s or grandchildren’s Etch-A-Sketch after it had been sitting on a shelf for a long, long time. Do you remember what happens? You shake it a time or two and the picture that whoever used it last made is still there. But you shake it again. And again. And yet again. And each time a little more of that old, hardened-on picture from ages ago dissolves – until finally you have a blank screen staring at you. And you can then begin to make your own picture, not determined, not foreordained by the picture that was there before. My friends, hear this: God this

morning is helping you to *both* shake the Etch-A-Sketch of your life *and* to re-draw the picture that is there. God doesn't want to be trapped by images that don't fit a God of amazing grace and unwavering love, and God doesn't want **you** trapped and maimed and stunted by pictures of life, of the world, of God that are hurtful or hateful. Is it an easy thing to do? No. It's a very hard thing to correct or even erase the pictures that have trapped you and hurt you, to overcome habits and patterns that have been passed through the generations, but it is possible, it is possible. Do you feel God's hand enfolding yours as you hold onto that knob of the Etch-A-Sketch of your life, do you hear God saying, "Draw it like this, my child, draw it like this"?