

Season after Pentecost - The Ten Commandments (Week 6)

June 30/July1, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Matthew 22:34-40; Exodus 20: 13, 17

Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Brothers Grimm told the story of a man who complained loudly that the world had been unfair. The rich had more than enough and he had little. One day the man walked home after expressing his bitter feelings to a crowd at the town square. Fortune appeared before him and said, “I have decided to provide you with wealth. Hold out your purse, and I will fill it with gold coins. There is one condition. If any of the gold falls out of the purse onto the ground, everything I gave you will become dust. Be careful. I see that your purse is old; do not overload it.”

The man was overjoyed. He opened the strings of his money pouch and watched as Fortune began to pour a stream of golden coins into it. The wallet soon became heavy.

“Is that enough?” Fortune asked. “Not yet,” the man cried.

Fortune poured several more coins, so that the purse was filled. “Shall I stop?”

“Not yet. Just a few more.”

But at that moment the purse split apart, the gold coins fell to the round, and the treasure turned to dust. Fortune disappeared, and the man was left with an empty wallet.”¹

Perhaps you would say that it was simply greed that cost the man his good fortune. We might call him a fool for not being content with “enough,” ungrateful for a generous blessing. Those are all true observations. Where did his greed, foolishness and ingratitude all begin? It started with coveting --- - wanting what another had; deciding that he and his life were of little value because he did not have what others did.

Coveting is not one of those words we hear very often except when we get to these final two commandments. Covet goes beyond desire to “must have” or all else is worthless or, at least, greatly diminished. Covet means happiness is hinged on getting that desired thing or person. Covet means to want something so much you will do just about anything to get it, even if it rightly belongs to another. I don’t think it is any accident that the Ten Commandments begins with “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3) and ends with the command “You shall not covet” (Ex. 20:17) In a way, they say the same thing. “Not coveting means not desiring anything in a way that diminishes God as your supreme treasure. And not having any gods before God means the same thing: Don’t treasure anything or anyone in a way that competes with God’s supreme place in your life.”² Coveting is a form of idolatry. When you covet, you are not loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength AND you will not love your neighbor as yourself.

“The last of the Ten Commandments, ‘You shall not covet,’ stands out from the rest. In those few words, the very heart of the law of God is laid open to us. God’s law does not concern itself with our actions alone. “You shall not covet” unreservedly proclaims that our thoughts, feelings, inclinations—matters of the heart—matter a great deal to the Lord.”

“The sin at which it strikes is an all-too-familiar companion. It surfaces when we hear of a coworker’s promotion, see a new car in the driveway next door, or reflect upon the seemingly perfect family at church. This enemy [covet] raises its evil head in a moment. We do not need to go looking for it or be schooled in it. Instead, it comes quite naturally. And though this sin is a familiar acquaintance, it is no friend. It is an opportunistic, deadly foe that grips the heart, turns the affections, occupies the mind, and unravels a life. Where there is peace, [coveting] brings hostility; where there is love, [coveting] stirs up division; and where there is contentment, [coveting] breeds complaint.”

“Why is coveting so deadly? Because it can never be satiated or satisfied. Coveting relentlessly craves more of this world, and a person’s thoughts, affections, and heart occupied with the world will cease seeking”³ God’s ways and kingdom. [Coveting] forsakes love for God and disposes one to hate his neighbor. Coveting pulls the heart down into the pit of self-seeking and the muck and mire of envy, slander, adultery, pride, dishonor, murder,

thievery, and idolatry.” Coveting separates us from God and from others. It makes us restless, unable to be content or at peace.

As with the other commandments, God is laying out a way of life that makes it possible to know the joy and abundance of God’s love and loving our neighbor. Coveting is a jailor. The commandments lay out a lifestyle that frees us from that which destroys life as God created it. They keep God at the center so that we then build lives that show the world the love of God, the peace of God that makes it possible to sing God’s praises in all circumstances. How do we combat the all-too-human tendency to covet, to want what others have, to never think our purse is full enough?

Look to Jesus. Walter Brueggeman puts it this way, “He did not have endowment, portfolio or credit, no interest or investments, no capacity to lobby or bribe politicians or to impact public opinion. He lived [simply], noticing that birds and lilies are mostly unemployed. But without such resources, we are told he had the capacity to feed crowds with bread so that they would never hunger . . . By his poverty we may become rich, not rich in money, but rich in humanity, wealthy in human dignity and respect, abundant in joy, overflowing in gratitude, free of anxiety that goes with having too much.” This doesn’t mean poverty is somehow desirable. What Jesus **did** show us is a way of life in which things do not get in the way of love or the freedom from those things that get between us and God and our neighbor.

We can combat covetness by keeping our eyes on Jesus and cultivating gratitude. When we look at our lives through the lens of gratitude, there's little room for jealousy and anxiety. Your eyes focus on what you DO have and not on what you don't. Looking at all good gifts as blessing – no matter how they came to you — opens our hearts to “rejoice in what we personally receive [and] also in the good gifts [others have received.]”⁴ Living in gratefulness grows the life-giving spirit of contentment. Contentment is a peace you can rest in no matter the circumstances. You can still want things and work toward goals, but your value and peace are not diminished by setbacks or even failures because you have chosen to live in the truth that, no matter what happens, God is good and gracious and faithful. There is no room for coveting, anxiety, jealousy or greed when you live thankfully trusting God's goodness.

There once was a man who had very little while others had so much. One day as the man walked home from the town square, Fortune appeared before him and said, “I have decided to provide you with wealth. Hold out your purse, and I will fill it with gold coins. There is one condition. If any of the gold falls out of the purse onto the ground, everything I gave you will become dust. Be careful. I see that your purse is old; do not overload it.”

The man was surprised that such a good thing would be happening to him. He opened the strings of his money pouch and watched as Fortune

began to pour a stream of golden coins into it. The wallet soon became heavy.

“Is that enough?” Fortune asked. “Oh, more than enough” the man cried. “Are you sure? There’s still some room in your money pouch.” “You are very generous, but my purse is old and likely to break. And I have more than enough to buy a small place to live and grow food I can share with my neighbors. There will still be money to give to Widow Martin, who struggles to make ends meet with all her children and to the missions of the church. I don’t need any more. What an amazing gift.”

The man went away to put his plans in motions, sharing his good fortune and giving thanks and praise. Amen. Linda M Alessandri 6/30/18

ENDNOTES

1. Adapted from William R. White, “Fortune and the Poor Man” Stories for Telling Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1986, p. 111

2. John Piper "Fighting Covetousness by Looking at Others" June 25, 2008 as posted at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/fighting-covetousness-by-looking-at-others>

3. Jason Helopoulos, “You Shall Not Covet” printed in Tabletalk Magazine June 1, 2015 as posted on <http://www.ligonier.org>

4. Jason Helopoulos, “You Shall Not Covet” printed in Tabletalk Magazine June 1, 2015 as posted on <http://www.ligonier.org>