

Lent 3 Year B: Exodus 20:1-17

There is considerable discussion about the Ten Commandments, at least in the south—whether or not it is possible, or right, or legal to post them in courthouses and legislatures, or in the classrooms of public schools. Some, perhaps, are just trying to test the principle of the separation of church and state. Others are sincere people concerned about the sagging morals of the country and feel that the posting of the Ten Commandments might bolster morality a bit. There are some who, plainly put, wish to bring the country back to God. “I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me. You’re not to turn me into a trinket or an idol or something you can put on a bumper sticker. Do not take the name of God lightly.

The command requires Israel to mobilize all of its life, in every sphere, around one single loyalty. In the contemporary world, as in the ancient world, we practice a kind of henotheism, which lets different gods have their play in different spheres. This command insists on the integrity, coherence, and unity of all life. It is not likely that it makes any claim to monotheism in the formal sense. That is, it does not insist that there are no other gods. It insists only that other gods like the gods of the Gentiles, the gods of the Egyptians, or the gods of the Canaanites must receive none of Israel’s loyalty or allegiance. The sin against this commandment which we are most in danger of is giving glory to any creature which is due to God alone. For example, pride makes a god of ourselves. Covetousness makes a god of money. Sensuality makes a god of the belly. We worship the god of public opinion, the god of pleasure, the god of success. Going after other gods is a snare in which we are liable to drift before suspecting any danger. These gods are a snare because they are not necessarily evil in their nature. They are innocent enough perhaps in themselves, but they impress us with an exaggerated idea of their importance and absorb that devotion which we owe to God.

Take the example of the tempter wanting Jesus to turn stones into loaves of bread. At that point, Jesus had been fasting in the wilderness for 40 days. He was famished. Does not turning stones into loaves of bread seem like a good idea? But Jesus says, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”. Presumably, Jesus got bread also, but he didn’t allow it to become an idol.

What is it that we really, really want? That God who is the Truth, that God who loves us unconditionally—I believe that is the God we all long for consciously or unconsciously. “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol.”

For some years I studied the Enneagram. I also studied Myers-Briggs, though not as much. I have gotten more cautious about indicators like these because they seem to be used as labels—not so much in the sense of putting people down—although that can be the case—but more in the sense of serving as a screen, a block that inhibits seeing the truth about people, a truth that is so much more complex than a letter or a number and a truth that is basically spiritual.

However, back in 1999, I attended a program by the famous Enneagram experts Don Riso and Russ Hudson. They presented the nine types as all searching for God, the Absolute. Each is looking for God through a different lens, but all are looking for God. The ONE is looking for God known as Perfection. The TWO tries to find the God of Unconditional Love. The THREE is looking for God known as Value or Authenticity. The FOUR hopes for the God which is True Identity and the FIVE is looking for the God of Brilliancy or Transparency. SIXES hope for the God of Strength while Sevens look for the God of Magnificence and Wonder. EIGHTS worship the God of Power while NINES search for the God of Unity and Wholeness.

All would be well for all nine approaches to God except that most of us find idols to strive for in place of God. For example, the ONE will try to find perfection in relationships, places, and projects. They hate mistakes and what they see as moral laxity. People, places, and projects never really measure up, which makes the ONE angry. The mature ONE learns that perfection is not found in any idol but only in God.

The SIX is looking for strength and stability. Since it is hard to realize that strength comes from inner light or God, most SIXES will tend to feel afraid and look for some outside authority like a set of rules or a person who seems decisive and authoritative. That rule book or authoritative person will become an idol for the SIX. And so it is for every type. Unless we go straight to the real God “You shall have no other gods before me” we are stuck with some idol or other.

Forward Day by Day has a commentary on one of my favorite Psalms, number 42: “As the deer longs for the water brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul is athirst for God. Athirst for the living God; when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?” The commentary

says: “There is within us a huge God-shaped space that can be filled only by God. Many people do not realize this and seek to fill it with something else. But food and drink will not fill it. The affection and admiration of other people will not fill it. No peak human experience—art, rewards, childbirth, drugs, glories, honors, music, sex---can fill it. The God-space can be gratified only by the one who designed it for his own abode. Only God can fill what was meant only for God.

As St. Augustine wrote: ‘You awaken and stir us so that only in praising you can we be content. You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.’”

Not surprisingly, the idea of putting God above all other concerns appears not only in Exodus and Deuteronomy but in the New Testament. In Matthew’s Gospel, a Pharisee who was expert in the law asked Jesus a question as a test: “What commandment in the law is greatest?” Jesus replied “You must love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and your whole soul, and your whole mind.” And love of our neighbor? It becomes possible when we love God.