

The Second Commandment

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Deuteronomy 4:9-20 NRSV

Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children — how you once stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, “Assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on the earth, and may teach their children so”; you approached and stood at the foot of the mountain while the mountain was blazing up to the very heavens, shrouded in dark clouds. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them on two stone tablets. And the Lord charged me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy.

Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure — the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now.

John 14:6-11

Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father if not through me. If you know me, you will know my Father too. From now on, you know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Master, show us the Father, and it will be enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Philip, all this time I’ve been with you, and you don’t know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me? The words I say to you, I don’t speak them on my own: but the Father, living in me, is doing his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if not, then believe because of the works themselves.

Children’s Story

Sammy the Squirrel was in love. Her name was Samantha, and she was the most wonderful squirrel Sammy had ever met. The two of them spent hour after hour together, day after day. It was true love.

One day, Samantha gave Sammy a special gift. It was a self-portrait. She had woven together oak leaves, pine needles, and even some of her hair to make a picture of her own face. Sammy loved Samantha’s special gift. He put it up on his wall. It was the last thing he looked at every night before he went to bed. And it was the first thing he looked at every morning when he got up. Every time he looked at the portrait, Sammy remembered Samantha and how wonderful she was.

Then something strange began to happen. Sammy still looked at Samantha’s self-portrait every evening and every morning. But he wasn’t spending much time with Samantha herself any more. Before long, Sammy wasn’t seeing Samantha at all. He had forgotten all about her. But her portrait? That was still on his wall. And Sammy still looked at it every day with love. How strange!

Sermon

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third

and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:4-6 NRSV)

That’s the Second Commandment, though, as I mentioned last week, some ways of counting the Ten Commandments have this prohibition as part of the First Commandment. Our tradition, however, keeps them separate, and that’s probably a good idea. Yes, the first two commandments are closely related. But they are also distinct and worth considering separately.

Some powerful Second Commandment stories in the Old Testament help us do that. There’s the story of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32, when Moses’ brother Aaron throws a bunch of gold into a fire and out pops a calf! (That’s the way he tells the story any way.) And there’s the story in 1 Samuel 4 of the Israelites using the Ark of the Covenant to guarantee victory in a battle against the Philistines. Only the battle was lost this time, and the Ark was lost, too.

So, let’s turn to what we number the Second Commandment. Let’s see if we can find out something of what it’s all about.

First of all, we have what the Second Commandment is against. “Don’t make any idols,” it says. “It doesn’t matter what they’re made out of. It doesn’t matter what they’re made to look like. Just don’t make them!”

Now, this commandment is not forbidding other gods. The First Commandment already took care of that. No, this commandment is forbidding visual representations of YHWH, Israel’s one true God. YHWH is revealed and known only as YHWH chooses. “At Horeb,” Moses reminds Israel (this is Deuteronomy 4), “you saw no form. You saw fire, you saw clouds, but you did not see YHWH. So don’t even think of trying to represent YHWH with an idol! It doesn’t matter what it’s made out of. It doesn’t matter what it’s made to look like. Just don’t do it! You did not see YHWH,” Moses reminds Israel, “but you heard the words when YHWH spoke. You heard the voice. Listen to the voice.”

Suppose Israel did make an idol. What would be so bad about that? The danger with visual representations, especially with tangible objects, is that they tend to supplant what they represent. Aaron made a calf for a “festival to YHWH” (Exodus 32:5). The calf represented YHWH. But right away Israel forgot YHWH. “These are your gods, O Israel,” they said, “who brought you out of Egypt!” (Exodus 32:4). Similarly, the Ark of the Covenant was a throne for YHWH’s presence. But the Israelites turned it into a talisman of blessing, a rabbit’s foot.

There was a time when prosperity was understood as a blessing from God, when wealth was understood as a sign of God’s blessing. What happens, though, when the object supplants what it represents? When wealth itself is worshiped, worshiped through the mechanisms of greed, which according to the New Testament is idolatry — when wealth itself is worshiped, then the well-head breaks open and millions upon millions of gallons of crude oil gush into the Gulf of Mexico. When wealth itself is worshiped, we ruin the earth we have been charged to keep.

So representations of God are both disobedient and dangerous. When human beings design objective ways to capture God’s presence and blessing, God is quickly and easily lost, and trouble soon follows.

This is some of what the Second Commandment is about. It’s pretty straightforward stuff. I think Jews and Muslims would nod in agreement. But we are in Jesus Christ, and it’s not enough for us to share affirmations with Jews and Muslims. We receive our law through Jesus Christ, and we need to look at the Second Commandment through the prism of God’s presence with us and for us in Jesus Christ.

And so, second, we have what the Second Commandment amounts to in Jesus Christ, some of it at least. Answer 97 of the Heidelberg Catechism says, “God can not and may not be visibly portrayed in any way.” That’s straight-up, old covenant, Second Commandment interpretation. Again the sort, I think, that any Jew or Muslim would affirm. “God can not and may not be visibly portrayed in any way.”

But according to Scripture, Jesus Christ is “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1:3); he is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15); so that “whoever has

seen [Jesus] has seen the Father” (John 14:9). So, God can be portrayed visibly, God may be portrayed visibly, and God has been portrayed visibly. Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God.

And this points us back to the critical starting point of our story. Human beings are made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26-27). That’s where our story begins. Hence the folly of the first sin, which was an attempt to be like God — that’s what the tempter said, “You will be like God” (Genesis 3:5) — by those who already were like God. In a similar way, confusion is evident whenever human beings make stand-ins for God or any kind of images of God. We are the image of God!

As the image of God, we are made to be like God. Not passive, not inert, not ineffectual, like the idols of Psalm 115 (vv. 4-7). But, like the LORD of Psalm 115, acting and bringing blessing (vv. 9-15). That’s why the BP oil spill is so tragic. It’s not just the fate of fish and marine mammals, the fate of beautiful beaches and lost livelihoods. It’s that we have acted and the result has been bane more than blessing. We have failed, from the lowest to the highest levels apparently, to be a positive presence, forsaking our honorable heritage as God’s image, serving instead, though our greed, the gods of wealth and profit that we have fashioned. And we know how that went. We threw in the silver and the gold, and out came common and preferred stock!

But a recovery is under way. Not in the Gulf, on a larger scale. Jesus Christ has come. And as One who is so perfectly the image of God, he is the true and perfect human being. He is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). He is the way for us to be truly human ourselves, serving no false and fabricated gods. He is the way for us to keep the Second Commandment, not in a mere old covenant way, by not making images of God, but in a new covenant way, the way in which we together become a visual representation of God.

That’s what Paul the Apostle is getting at when he talks about us being renewed in the image of God “in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24), and when he talks about us being “transformed by the renewing of [our] minds” (Romans 12:2). Become what we were made to be, the image of God — that’s how we keep the Second Commandment.

Here are some implications of that. First, we need to watch out that we don’t idolize the image. To pour our time and money and worry into perfecting our selves, whether through cosmetic surgery or fitness and diet obsessions, or through outward adornment and disguises (jewelry and clothes, shoes and sunglasses) — that is idolatry! Second, as the New Testament warns, we need to be on guard against the idolatry of greed. Pagan temples in the ancient world, the place where idols were worshiped, often had large storerooms for gold and silver, for jewels, for grain. We, on the other hand, have chest freezers, multi-car garages, walk-in closets, and self-storage units, full and overflowing. “Be on your guard!” says Scripture.

Third, and this is of great positive importance, we have much to give ourselves to. God acts and creates and blesses; God helps and saves; God suffers and surrenders. So it is written in the beginning, in the psalm, and in Jesus Christ. The Second Commandment says to us, “Don’t make an image of God, be the image of God!” In other words, “Reflect the love and justice of God to your world and to your street.” How?

- Go to a school board meeting. Perhaps you can help bring order out of the chaos of funding cuts.
- Ride the bus if you can, or start sharing rides. After all, there is a connection between our driving habits and the oil spill.
- Turn off the TV, get out your pencils, and draw. Create something!
- Plant flowers, trim trees, tear out a lilac bush. Enhance the beauty and order around you.
- But don’t worship green things, not even a one hundred year old tree along North Broadway. No, worship God, the one true God, who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

There are all kinds of ways to be the image of God. Act somehow. Create something. Bless someone. Help and save. Suffer and surrender. (Remember, Jesus Christ is the perfect image.) So, pray over this. Ask God to aim you, to aim us. Keep asking and keep doing — start doing, if you need to. This is our lifelong project.

One last thing. Today is Pentecost Sunday. Today we begin to celebrate, for a season, God’s gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is our life. The Spirit is our energy. The Spirit is our guide. Because the Spirit has come, being the image of God is neither relic nor fantasy, it is actuality. By the Spirit, Christ “makes us

wholeheartedly willing and ready, from now on, to live for him” (A 1). The Spirit is “renewing us to be more like Christ” (A 86).

And so, with penitence and humility over our failures, we nevertheless “never stop striving, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, to be renewed more and more after God’s image” (A 115). That’s what we were meant to be and, by God’s grace, what we shall be.

That’s where the Second Commandment aims us.