

Getting Our Priorities Straight: The One Thing

Exodus 20:1-5

March 13, 2011

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other Gods before me.

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 below, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for the I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquities of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

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*God is great, God is good,
let us thank God for our food.
By his hand we all are fed,
give us, Lord, our daily bread.*

Our son Wells is on a Johnny Appleseed kick right now, but before that we would try and say this blessing at every meal.

“But why, Dad? Why do we have to say a blessing?” he asks.

There are a lot of ways to answer that question:

“Because I told you so...”

“So that you will know that it is time to stop playing with your toys and eat...”

“To make meal-time special...”

But, most importantly, “We say a blessing as a thank-you to God.”

On the face of it, it doesn't sound that radical. Remembering to say thank-you to God seems rather run-of-the-mill. But I would invite you to see it differently. In a world where there are many gods who compete to catch and hold our attention, and in a world well-practiced in putting “the royal **me**” at the center of the universe – the idea that we would stop, reflect, and, by thanksgiving, acknowledge the primary place of the triune God in the order of things is downright revolutionary.

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So the commandment begins: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other God's before me.*

There are a lot of important verses of scripture, but perhaps none more primary than this one that gives us the First Commandment.

Martin Luther famously said that the whole of scripture is, in some sense, commentary on the First Commandment.¹ Most sins – from Adam and Eve's to our own are related to an inability to follow these seemingly straightforward directions: *You shall have no other Gods before me.*

¹ Miller, Patrick, *The Ten Commandments* (Westminster John Knox) p 27.

The Ten Commandments are the first words that God speaks directly to God's people. In other places, God speaks through prophets, or visions. Here, the scripture says, God writes the commandments in stone with God's own hand.²

The first word from God's mouth has to do with idolatry – the human tendency to put something, someone – anything, anyone in front of or before God.

When it comes to showing us how to live, what is most important to God is to help us get our priorities straight by making sure that the God who created, redeemed, and sustains us is first in our life.

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About 20 years ago, before any of the youth who will lead us in worship next Sunday were born, a movie called *City Slickers* hit the silver screen.

The story is about three middle class, white-collar, average joes who go on an adventure by spending two weeks on a cattle ranch in the wild west. Their guide is an old cowboy (played by Jack Palance) named "Curly."

Well into their comedic adventure, Curly has finally had it. He squares his jaw, looks the average joe named Mitch right in the eye and says, "You city slickers are all alike. You spend sixty hours a week, fifty weeks a year getting' yourself all tied up in knots, then you think you can come out here for two weeks and straighten yourself out. What you gotta find is this, (and he holds up his finger.)" "Your finger?" asks Mitch. "No—the one thing." "What's that?" asks Mitch. "That's what you gotta find out," says Curly.³

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What is it for you? What is your one thing?

It has been said that "to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one [thing] with your whole heart."⁴

² Miller

³ With thanks to Joe Clifford, Pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Dallas, for this reference.

⁴ Martin Luther, quoted by Miller (p. 19).

What captures your heart? Who or what do you trust? In whom or in what do you believe?

In our Ash Wednesday service last week, Bryan pushed us off the dock and into the season of Lent with a great sermon about “isms.” He made it a point to step on everyone’s toes - including his own - in order to demonstrate how easy it is for us to fall prey to the sin of idolatry.

He rattled off an impressive list. For starters: capitalism, consumerism, nationalism, patriotism, Protestantism, cynicism, progressivism, conservatism...

No doubt some of these describe you and me. But, do they capture our heart? Do they claim our trust? Have they become our god?

The focus of our worship this Lent will be on some of those scriptures that provide commentary on the First Commandment. We are going to talk about the idolatry of accumulation, about the idolatry of money, about the idolatry of our own opinions, the idolatry of knowledge, the idolatry of power.

Idolatry is something that we are all good at, you know. It turns out that for about as long as people have been created in God’s image they have made it a habit of creating their own gods.

And since it is so prevalent, you have to wonder why God considers idolatry to be such a big deal? It sure would be easier if being a good Christian was only about being polite, and nice, and having good manners.

Yet, for God, faithful living begins with loyalty.

Read the First Commandment again and you will see that God does not just ask for our loyalty, but that God is jealous for it.

And in case you were wondering, that jealousy is a result of love.

The God who claims our loyalty is the one who, long ago, led the covenant people out of the slavery in Egypt and into freedom.

The God who claims our loyalty is the one who journeyed toward the cross to be crucified, only to be raised, in order that we might have freedom from sin and death.

There are no other gods who can do these things.

The God who has rightful claim to our loyalty promises us shalom and salvation.

The other gods who compete for our loyalty promise us an easy retirement.

The God who has rightful claim to our loyalty is in relationship with us marked by sacrifice and commitment.

The other gods who compete for our loyalty see us a means to a profitable end.

The God who has rightful claim to our loyalty was in the beginning and will be in the end.

The other gods who compete for our loyalty are like grass that withers and flowers that fade.

The One we worship is jealous for our loyalty, for our trust, for our heart – because God knows that in our ability to give over these things we will find freedom, and life, and love.

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In Scottish tradition, at the baptism of a child, the pastor uses these words:

*For you Jesus Christ came into the world:
for you he lived and showed God's love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
and cried at the last, 'It is finished';
for you he triumphed over death
and rose in newness of life;
for you he ascended to reign at God's right hand.
All this he did for you..*

All this God did for us.

What more can we give, save for our loyalty and thanksgiving?