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Keeping It Unreal

Exodus 20: 4-6

At first glance the Second Commandment – “Thou shalt make no graven images” -- seems the easiest of the Commandments to keep because it seems to say nothing to us at all. It seems aimed at an ancient day and age when religious people tended to represent their deities in material, palpable objects, while the Hebrews refrained from allowing this practice. Viewed from a certain perspective, the Second Commandment seems to express a certain parochial triumphalism, asserting the superiority of one religion over the practices of its neighbors.

But in fact, the Second Commandment safeguards a vital spiritual principle.

First of all, remember: the ancient people were not children. They were not fools.

They knew that a golden bull or a representation of a sheaf of wheat was not a god.

They knew that these were symbols through which one peered toward a transcendent power beyond.

The real question was, “What was the nature of the transcendent power beyond?”

To the pagan people, the golden bull represented sexual fertility, necessary to society.

To pagan people, the sheaf of wheat symbolized agricultural fecundity, crucial to their existence.

What the pagan cultures did was reduce the totality of the divine to a singular focus upon those needs that were most essential to their livelihood.

Their gods became articulations of their fears. Their worship became an expression of their anxieties.

The ancient Hebrews, by contrast, were wise enough to realize that to reduce the divine to a mere potency that addressed one’s most acute worries was to fail to do justice to the majestic totality of God.

The Second Commandment is the hardest of the Commandments to understand – and the hardest to keep. In fact, the Biblical history of the Hebrew people could be described as a long chronicle of their vulnerability to transgressing the Second Commandment.

The ministry of the Hebrew prophets from Moses to Jesus could be viewed as a campaign to call God’s people to hearken back to heed the Second Commandment:

“You shall make for yourselves no graven images.”

Take a short trip through Biblical history with me.

We see Moses atop Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments,

carrying in his arms the twin stone tablets upon which was written the compressed wisdom of God.

Meanwhile his people were down below cavorting in an orgiastic ritual around a golden bull.

Even as Moses carried the Second Commandment to his people, they were in the midst of breaking it.

Note that Moses not only destroyed the golden bull, he destroyed the two stone tablets, too.

Even though they carried God’s holy words, Moses didn’t want those tablets to become objects of worship.

He understood that to worship the true and living God, one must keep God, in one sense, “unreal.”

He wanted his people to worship the Spirit beyond the tablets – not the tablets themselves.

Fast forward to the eighth century before Christ in the Jewish northern Kingdom of Israel.

Times were flush, business was booming, the stock market bullish,

and the religion mirrored the prosperity of the age,

observing its ritual among pomp and circumstance,

sure that God would be impressed by the lavish nature of their observances. But what was God's response? God called a simple shepherd named Amos to leave his farm in Judah and preach a sermon on the Second Commandment that rings throughout the ages to this day: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!" Those, my friends, are the words of a man who truly understood the Second Commandment. Amos was making the point that even religious ritual can become a graven image that obscures the worship and reality of the true and impalpable God.

Leap another hundred years later, to the southern Jewish kingdom of Judah. Israel had been destroyed, having continued on its merry way to judgment and annihilation. Now it was Judah's time to be in crisis. Babylon threatened to overwhelm her. But was Judah worried? No! Why? Because they possessed Solomon's temple. God had to protect Jerusalem and its people because of their devotion to God's sacred temple. But God raised up a gifted, if unfortunate, prophet named Jeremiah, who actually stood in the portals of the sacred temple to say: "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!' Amend your ways and your doings and I will let you dwell in this place." Even the beautiful temple of Solomon had become in its own way a graven image that obscured the reality of the impalpable God.

Babylon came and destroyed Solomon's temple and exiled virtually every Jew of importance. As strangers in a strange land, the Jews wondered if perhaps their religion had come to an end. All of their worship had centered around the Temple. Now the Temple was no more. Was God no more, too? But the Jewish leaders did something creatively wise: they brought their people together by centering worship around the Law. It would be fair to say that devotion to the Law actually saved the Jewish religion. But if the apostle Paul is to be believed, over the centuries the Law became an object of worship, too. People became so devoted to the Law that they fixated on the Law and ceased to worship the God who authored it and whose reality lay beyond it. When the Jewish people were allowed to return home, they built a temple that lasted for centuries until it became a casualty of war yet again. Then Herod, for political reasons, built them another one, but when Jesus sensed that people were beginning to make a graven image of it, too, he forecast, "One day soon not one stone will stand upon another." Then Jesus threw them a curve ball, saying, "Destroy this temple, and I will rebuild it in three days." They thought he was still talking about a building. He, of course, was talking about his frail, vulnerable temple of his body, which for all its frailty was where the vibrant Holy Spirit of God dwelled alive and well.

Of course, perhaps you are sitting there thinking, 'Alright, Dr. Kremer, that's fine. That's interesting stuff. But it's all in the past. It has no real relevance. We don't have a problem with graven images today.' Oh, really? A generation ago, the great theologian Paul Tillich noted how African tribes grossly exaggerated the sexual organs of their male and female sacred figurines, so as to accentuate the qualities of fertility and virility that these tribes so prized. Tillich then offered this extraordinary observation. He noted that these tribes' emphases on fertility and virility, as evidenced in their figurines,

had resulted in representations of humanity that were warped and distorted. Their figurines were, in fact, misshapen. In accentuating certain aspects of human behavior to the exclusion of others, these tribes had lost a sense of the totality and proportion of the true human being. Their figurines represented caricatures of what it meant to be whole.

Now, does anyone want to try and tell me that our society's accentuation of certain aspects of human behavior, whether it is sexuality, athleticism or the ability to make money, hasn't left us with numerous examples of warped and misshapen human beings? Are we not surrounded by caricatures of humanity, misshapen by one unworthy worship or another? True, we may not hold festivals in honor of Bacchus, the god of wine, but are there not millions of people whose lives are controlled by a fixation on alcohol or drugs? I doubt many businessmen know that words like "merchant," "merchandise," and "mercantile," derive from the god Mercury, the god of trade, travel, profit and deal-making. But are there not countless people around us whose lives are warped by their fixation on their business? No one claims to worship Venus, the goddess of love, yet those who bombard us with images of humanity through advertisements bid us daily to worship erotic love and physical beauty. I doubt five people in here know that Penates is the god of the home. Yet our culture invites us through every media to make a shrine of our home, even of our yard. In truth, everything from the cars we drive, to the schools we attend, to the clothes we wear, to the toothpaste we put on our teeth can be traced to the influence of image-makers who want us to equate vitality and success with buying their brand. There are many ways to be influenced by graven images.

This lesson was brought home to me some years ago when I took my son Stewart to a golf shop to buy a new three-wood. As fathers are wont to do in matters of such importance, I told him that cost was not an issue. He looked at and hit all the top-of-the-line clubs, all the top brands. None caught his fancy. Then he went over to the bargain bin and pulled out a clearance-sale three-wood, with a cheap, orange-painted shaft. He hit it a few times and said, "Dad, this is the one." "Son," I remonstrated, "don't you want to look again at these Callaways, or Nikes or Hogans?" "No," he answered, "this one feels right." Suddenly I realized the image-makers had done a number on me. I was equating quality with a name and a price. Buy a certain brand, pay enough money, and it will surely guarantee performance. Or so I thought. His was the wiser mind. He knew that something as intangible yet real as "feel," could not be captured by a price tag or a brand name. "Thou shalt make for yourself no graven images."

We must never forget, God is always a movement, never a monument! What we call Christianity began as a movement of the Spirit, in a place without walls. But we, as much as those ancients of old, try to reduce our worship of God to an expression of our hopes, our fears, our anxieties. So many of our prayers are a matter of us saying unto God, 'Give me this, give me this, give me that.' Unconsciously, most of us try to reduce God into a graven image to suit our own use. Yet the Second Commandment calls us to understand that God can never be captured within any of our pursuits or passions, not within our devotion to our business, or to our family, or to our friends, not within our quest for knowledge, not even within our religious ceremonies.

God is so real as to be beyond our experience of everything that we call real.
We only truly begin to grasp the nature of God when we realize that God is by nature unfathomable.

God is a movement. Never a monument.

We cannot contain God within our human conceptions, and when we think we have done so,
we have only created yet another idol.

That is true of temples; it is true of theologies, too.

When I was a doctoral student at the seminary, I started receiving questionnaires in the mail
from people who were concerned that one day soon I might graduate and start teaching their children.
All the questionnaires were of the same ilk.

“Do you believe the world was created in seven days? Yes or No?”

Do you believe the sun actually stood still for Joshua? Yes or No?”

Do you believe the Bible is inerrant? Yes or No?”

Initially, these questionnaires disturbed me, but then I realized,
the people who sent them were just scared.

The world was changing so fast.

Barriers of racism, sexism, homophobia were being challenged.

The explosion of knowledge and the expansion of technology were bringing questions
to the fore that had never been asked before.

Everything seemed in flux.

It just seemed so simple to think that God would be pleased if we all affirmed God’s word as infallible.

Well, the truth is, God’s Word is infallible, and at the heart of that Word is the truth

that we cannot contain the fullness of God’s Holy Spirit within the confines of man-made thoughts.

A generation ago, Southern Baptists truly believed that they would flourish if only they could get rid
of people who didn’t believe the Bible the way they did. So they got rid of us.

Guess what? I read that last year Southern Baptists recorded an all-time low for baptisms.

So, hey, it wasn’t us holding them back!

One day maybe they will come to grips with the fact that the dynamic Spirit of God
cannot be contained within the confines of their fundamentalist theorems.

In truth, fundamentalism is just one more graven image.

But the truth is, we make and worship similar graven images, too.

God’s Second Commandment stands over in judgment against us.

And we must heed that word!

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Second in a Series