



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, April 21, 2013
The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Festal Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels
on
Exodus 20:17 and Deuteronomy 5:21

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Sermon Series: Commandments as Good News
SERMON 11: DO NOT COVET

With this prohibition against coveting, we come to the last of the ten commandments given to Moses. You shall not covet: you shall not immoderately desire, or envy, or crave, or wish for, or long for, your neighbor's stuff.

In this prohibition of a thought, or a feeling, we've crossed into some different territory. For the rest of the commandments—whether Sabbath-keeping, or parent-honoring, or refraining from murder and adultery, and so forth—these commandments are all things to do, or not to do, as the case may be. And they're phrased in that way: you may want to do those things, the bad ones, but don't. It doesn't say anything about thinking about them. No harm, no foul, we might say.

Not so with coveting. Coveting is something that happens, we might say, "internally"; it's possible to covet without anybody else in the world knowing. Just sitting there, minding your own business, and breaking a commandment. It's even possible to covet quite against your own wishes! We might say, for example, As I was walking down Madison Ave., and I saw the stuff in the windows, I didn't want to want it; but I did. I've tried my best not to, but I do. Or, more pointedly, when I saw my friend's success, I didn't want to want it; when I saw his popularity; when I saw her achievements. I tried my best not to want them, but I did.

Is that *really* such a bad thing, however? Isn't it natural to covet my neighbor's stuff? After all, the basic dynamic is familiar enough, from Adam and Eve coveting the knowledge of good and evil, to Jacob coveting Esau's blessing, and on and on, down to you and me. So even if it isn't "natural," in the sense of being how God created us to be, it probably is "natural," in the sense of being the experience of every sinful person that has ever lived. Augustine, that insightful proto-psychologist, saw it, and it drove him crazy: children, infants even, before they even know how to speak, covet the mother's milk they're already having, if they see someone else having it, too. It makes no sense. You've got all you could ever want, he'd say! Why are you kicking your brother to get his, too? And it never stops. What is coveted may change with age, and learned social mores may keep us from kicking our brothers; but coveting itself seems perennial.

You can make the case that the first and last commandments actually have a lot to do with each other. Because the unhealthy desire to have what others have is a misguided desire (commandment 10), that may even bleed over into making something else our God (commandment 1), because it

shows that we believe that something else, besides God, is going to bring us to fulfillment, to make things okay, to make us okay. If I only had this or that; if I was only this way or that way.

Covetousness, then, comes from a sense of dissatisfaction, a place of lack. Perhaps it even comes from a place of fear, a fear of not having enough, or not being enough. So one of the positive ways we might look at the prohibition against coveting as good news is to see it as an assurance, the God of Israel saying to his people: You're going to be okay. Saying to each and every one of them: You don't need this and that and the other thing. What you need will be taken care of; I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, after all. I saw what you needed, and I provided it. And I'll keep providing it: I will bring you into the Promised Land; you have my word. So don't covet; those misguided desires will disappoint you, they'll never be enough; you will eat and eat and eat and never stop being hungry. Don't covet; you have what you need, and you will have what you need.

Now, this isn't to say that desire itself is wrong; far from it. Freeing oneself from desire is not, and never has been, seen as a good in the mainstream traditions of either Judaism or Christianity. But misguided desire is where the trouble is. Desiring the wrong thing.

The truth is, God alone is our true heart's desire. What we want—that is, what will truly satisfy the longing that is deep within us—what we really want is God. It's God that we're grasping after, trying to grab onto, trying to hold onto, trying to gather up and keep and possess for ourselves. All of our other covetous desires, at root, are counterfeit, misguided efforts to seek after God.

Now, this may sound utterly daft. "What I really want is God?" you might be saying. "Actually, what I really want is one of the many things that I see in this incredible, beautiful, amazing city, that I don't have. What I really want is the success and smarts and popularity that others have, and I don't."

But behind all of those things, though, it is, really, God that we're after, and we can see this precisely in the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments itself. In the very moment God is giving Moses the two tablets, Exodus tells us that, down below, the people have gathered around Aaron, and are pleading with him for a god. They haven't heard from their God recently, or from Moses, and they want to cover all their bases; everybody else has a god, after all, and they want one, too.

They build a golden calf, believing that it, finally, will be what will bring them to fulfillment. They want what will finally make them complete, something to quiet the murmuring heart, and take away the anxiety of being a wandering people in an uncertain and anxious time. It must be a matter of having something, they think, something their neighbors have; if we just had that, then things would be okay.

Perhaps it sounds familiar; we wandering people in a time uncertain and anxious, the belief that the answer to the questions we have, the solution to the problems we have, that which will finally bring peace, is at hand, though just a bit out of our reach. There is an apocryphal story of a fantastically rich man, who is asked, "How much money is enough?" And it's said that he replied, "Just a little more." Yes, just a little more; and that will do it. Always just a little more.

But there is only one thing that provides this completion that we long for, and it is God, and covetousness shows that we're looking for God in the wrong places, trying to build a golden calf of one kind or another. But it's never enough. So just a little more, and then a little more.

May we look for God in the right places. He is the Lord our God, who brought us out of Egypt. He is the Lord our God, who will bring us out of death. He is our true heart's desire.