

<Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Matthew 22:1-14>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

I'm curious, particularly to those of you who were able to join us in worship last week: do any of you remember what the first of the Ten Commandments is? I'll give you a hint: it begins with the words, “I am the Lord your God...”.

In 2020, as our nation was deep in the midst of the pandemic and lock-down, I did what so many other suddenly-homebound people did: I attempted to explore a potential new hobby and to make something I had never made before. For many people that was making sourdough bread or learning to knit or even play an instrument. For me, I determined that I wanted to build a desk. And not just any plain table-top desk, but what is known as a Secretary desk; the kind that has a fold down surface that reveals a bunch of various cubbies with little drawers.

I found a set of plans online and ordered the necessary lumber to be delivered, and then I got to work. We were creating a home office space, and the desk I was attempting to make was going to be the finishing touch. I measured; I cut; I pieced together...and eventually I had a desk. In a time of global, national, and personal anxiety, I turned to creating something to help manage that anxiety. Much like Padraig O Tuama stated in his poem that I shared last week, I reminded myself of my connection to others, and even to God, by actively creating something.

We are a tactile people, we humans; we find comfort in being able to touch and see and feel the presence of a thing. It makes sense, then, that the more anxious or uncertain we are, the greater becomes that tactile need. Think of the stereotypes surrounding a person's mid-life crisis, in which they go out and physically re-create themselves or buy a new car or take up a new hobby. Or, think of the commonality of “retail therapy” when someone is feeling down, the going out and shopping for new things to help themselves feel better. The more anxious we are, the more uncertain, the greater this tactile need becomes.

Which is why it is so easy to understand what led the people of Israel to the situation they find themselves in now, and why Aaron - placed into temporary leadership by Moses - goes along with the crowds' demands.

Moses has been up on the mountain for a long time. He has been meeting with God, and hammering out the details of the covenantal relationship. He has been learning from God how the people are to be, and how they are to behave, and how they are to relate to God and to one another and to neighboring countries in the world. But Moses has been gone from the people a long time. We've already seen how anxious they are as they made their way through the wilderness after their time of slavery in Egypt. We've already seen how, at every potential point of crisis they have proclaimed their desire to go back to Egypt, back to what was familiar. And we've even seen how God,

through Moses, has led them at each step, meeting their needs and supporting them. But Moses has been gone for a long time now, and unsure of what to do, the people have determined that Moses is gone. So they demand of Aaron to make for them a new god that they might worship, and in which they might find comfort.

This is not a foreign idea to them. They had lived for generations among the Egyptians and had seen the statues representing the pantheon of Egyptian gods, some as tall as buildings but many more small enough to be kept on the mantle in the house. As the anxiety of the people of Israel ratchets upward, they return to their tactile need for comfort, and their minds go back to these man-made idols of the Egyptian gods. They demand of Aaron that he make for them a new god. And poor Aaron, perhaps feeling anxious himself, goes along with their requests. The people, facing yet another unknown, want a god that they can put in their bag and carry along with them and place on the mantle. The only problem is: that's not the people YHWH God is preparing them to be.

“I am the Lord your God...”.

It is said that God is a jealous God, but what we translate as ‘jealous’ might more accurately be understood as ‘passionate.’ God looks down from the mountain, from which he and Moses have been conversing and planning how God and the people will be in covenant relationship with each other, and sees what the anxious people are doing, and God's passion is inflamed. “Go down at once!” we hear God proclaim to Moses. “YOUR people, whom YOU brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them...”.

“I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me...”.

Did you hear the accusation in God's statement? The changing of the relationship? No longer are the people God's people; now, they are Moses' people, and not God's.

There's a reason why the past several weeks have placed us in the wilderness with the people, as they journeyed out of Egypt and toward the Promised Land, as they - time and again - questioned and tested Moses, questioned and tested God. And, there's a reason why the last three weeks in the Gospel of Matthew have had us listening to Jesus' parables to the chief priests and Pharisees, parables which indict and condemn them for misguided hearts, even though the outward practices have been spot on.

Because these are important lessons for us to learn, and even we, two-thousand some years later, are still trying to learn them. God is still trying to turn our hearts toward God, more and more fully, even as the world around us grabs our attention with shiny things, and especially when we are felling anxious or uncertain. A few weeks ago, our reminder was to not let unmanaged anxiety determine our actions and decisions, but to faithfully turn our actions back toward the ones which bring us closer to God. Today, the second part of that lesson is the reminder that it was never about our actions alone, but it has always been about our hearts.

In this third parable of Jesus, in which he continues to call out the religious leaders, we see extreme measures taken as invitees to a royal wedding decide that they can't make it. After two rounds of announcing and inviting, now that all is prepared, did you notice the excuses of those who had been invited to the feast, as to why they wouldn't attend? “But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized the slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.”

The hearts of the invitees had turned toward the things which they had lifted up to be of greater importance. Their hearts were turned toward their own man-made gods: farm and property, business, and even avarice & violence. In this parable, those things had become their gods. What, today, have we turned into our own gods, and made idols of? Power & status? A sense of 'gatekeeping' who is in and who is out, often based on wealth or appearance? Our own capability to climb the professional ladder?

All these things - and more - turn our hearts away from the heart of God, and the covenant relationship has always been about how our hearts are connected and attuned to God's heart. At the end of the parable, the servants are sent out to find people in the streets and bring them in to the feast, but going in means attuning themselves to the caliber of the feast and the host.

As Chelsey Harmon writes, “Everyone is able to join the feast, but joining means more than just walking through the door. Joining God means *joining* God...Wearing the right kind of clothing is symbolic throughout the Scriptures for being righteous and pure, and here it signifies commitment to that kind of life” (*Center for Excellence in Preaching*).

The question is always: does a thing serve me, or does it serve God? Does it occupy my heart, or does it turn my heart to God's heart? I still have that desk; it has journeyed with us for two moves, and I still take a bit of pride in knowing I put it together. But if the day ever comes when I hold more pride in that than in the service toward God that is enabled when utilizing such a desk, then it's gone.

Jesus invites us to attune our hearts to the heart of God, and enter into the feast that has been prepared. Moses pushes back and reminds God that God chose these people and has been the one to lead them out, and their hearts are still being transformed. Just as our hearts, likewise, continue to be transformed, transforming us in the process. “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me.” Come, let us worship our God. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*