

## A GOD NOT IN OUR POCKET

Scriptures: Exodus 32:1-6, Judges 17:1-6

On the back of the bulletin I have listed the numbering system for the Ten Commandments used in Lutheran and Presbyterian churches. Before I went to Potlatch, ID, and became the pastor of a Lutheran as well as a Presbyterian church, I had no idea there were differing numbering systems for the Ten Commandments. I thought the Ten Commandments were the same in all churches, but they aren't. The Lutheran and Catholic churches take the first two commandments: "Have no other gods" and "Do not make a graven image" and group them together into one commandment. Then they take the last commandment about not coveting and split it into two commandments: "Do not covet your neighbor's house" and "Do not covet your neighbor's wife, servants, or belongings."

I am not sure I see the logic of splitting the last commandment. Maybe Lutherans have a special problem with lusting after their neighbor's house, more than, say, their neighbor's wife. But I am not sure they should be two separate commandments.

I do, however, see the logic in what the Lutherans and Catholics did with the first commandment. The second commandment in the Presbyterian column: "Do not make a graven image" sounds like a subcategory of the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods." I can see why the Lutherans and Catholics combined those two commandments into one.

But they missed something in the process. If you look at these two commandments more closely, they are not the same. The second commandment not only forbids us to make an idol or image of another god; it forbids us to make an idol or image of the *Lord*. Making an idol is not just about worshiping another god; it is about trying to make the one true God into something we can mold and shape and carry around with us.

To illustrate, turn back with me to our second scripture lesson from Exodus 32 (OT, p. 78). Moses, the leader of the Israelites, has gone up to Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. While he is gone, the people of Israel decide they need a new leader. So they turn to Aaron, Moses' brother, and ask him to make gods who will go with them on their journey through the wilderness. This sounds like the Israelites are making other gods to take the place of the Lord, something forbidden by the first commandment. But notice what happens in verse 4. Aaron makes for them a golden calf and the people declare, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" By the way, the Hebrew word translated "gods" could also be translated in the singular as "god." This would make more sense because there is only one golden calf. Basically the people are pointing at the golden calf and saying, "Here is the God who brought us up out of the land of Egypt." The golden calf is meant to be an image or representation of the Lord.

This impression is confirmed by Aaron in the next verse—verse 5: "When Aaron saw this; he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.'" Aaron does not see the golden calf as a different god than the Lord; he sees it as an image or representation of the Lord.

The same thing happens in our first scripture lesson from Judges 17. I won't try to explain the whole story, but a mother from one of the tribes of Israel takes some silver and says, "I consecrate the silver to the Lord from my hand for my son, to make an idol of cast metal." The woman did not see herself making another god. She saw it as making a silver image or representation of the Lord.

What is wrong with that? What is wrong with having a gold or silver statue to serve as a reminder of the Lord? What is wrong with having something we can carry around with us to represent the Lord's presence in our midst?

Let me repeat something I said last week. Ancient people were not stupid. Ancient people knew the difference between a god and a piece of metal. They knew perfectly well that their gods were bigger than a statue. The statue only served as an image or representation of their god. Having the statue assured them of God's presence and blessing.

That, however, is what God did not want. In the second commandment, God not only forbids us to worship other gods. God forbids us to make an idol or image of the Lord. Why? Because the Lord does not want us to think that we can possess God the way we possess an image. Making an idol, an image of God out of wood, metal, or stone, fools us into thinking that we can put God in our hip pocket, that we can carry God around with us and pull God out any time we need to.

There is a good example of this later in the Bible. In I Samuel, chapter 4, the Israelites are at war with the Philistines. The battle is going badly, but the Israelite leaders come up with an idea. They say, "Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies." At this point the people of Israel are treating the ark of the covenant like a golden calf—like something they can carry around with them to guarantee God's presence and blessing.

The irony in this is that the ark of the covenant is the box that contained the Ten Commandments, one of which was not to make any idols. Unfortunately, the ark of the covenant itself had become an idol. They thought that if they brought the ark of the covenant into their camp, they could count on God's help. Never mind that the leaders of the people of Israel were corrupt or that they disregarded God's commandments in their daily lives. They figured that as long as they had the ark they had God on their side.

It does not work that way. Despite having the ark of the covenant in their camp, the people of Israel were defeated. Despite having the golden calf, the people of Israel were almost destroyed in the wilderness. The Lord is not the kind of God you can carry around in a box. The Lord is not the kind of God you can put in your hip pocket. The Lord comes to us and helps us by God's own free choice, but if we ever think we can capture God's presence and guarantee God's help in our lives, then we are mistaken, especially if we spend most of our lives ignoring God.

Let me give an example. I often have couples come to me wanting to have their wedding in a church and wanting me, a Christian minister, to do the ceremony, even though they never

come to church at any other time. I wonder about this sometimes. Don't get me wrong. I am glad when people come to me wanting God's blessing for their marriage and feeling that they should come to a church to receive it. That is a good thing. But I wonder sometimes if the church has become like a large graven image, like a magical way of guaranteeing God's presence.

The truth is that God cannot be captured in a church any more than in a golden calf or a silver statue. A church wedding does not assure God's presence in a marriage. The presence of God is something you must nurture through a lifelong relationship. The presence of God is experienced through faithfulness to God over an extended period of time. It is not captured in a single wedding ceremony.

The same is true for baptism or even joining the church. Baptism is a wonderful gift. It is a sign that we are adopted into the family of Christ. Joining the church is our response to that gift. It is a conscious acceptance of our new identity as children of God. But it is not a good luck charm. It is not a magical guarantee of God's protection. Baptism does not give us a claim on God; it gives God a claim on us. Joining the church does not guarantee that God will go with you; it is an invitation for you to go with God and to discover what God may want to do with your life.

Interestingly, though the Bible forbids us to make an image of God, there is one thing that the Bible itself calls an image of God: Genesis 1:26-27—"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . . .' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

Instead of making an image of God, we are to be one. Instead of trying to capture God and use God for our purposes, we must let God capture us and use us for God's purposes. When we quit trying to capture God in a statue or shrine, then God can be found anywhere. And the place where God most wants to be found is in you.

- Ken Onstot  
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