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Emmanuel Presbyterian Church  
November 24, 2019: Ten Commandments, Week 11

Exodus 20:17  
Genesis 3:1-13  
Psalm 119:161-176

Psalm 119:161-176

Princes persecute me without cause,  
but my heart stands in awe of your words.  
162 I rejoice at your word  
like one who finds great spoil.  
163 I hate and abhor falsehood,  
but I love your law.  
164 Seven times a day I praise you  
for your righteous ordinances.  
165 Great peace have those who love your law;  
nothing can make them stumble.  
166 I hope for your salvation, O Lord,  
and I fulfil your commandments.  
167 My soul keeps your decrees;  
I love them exceedingly.  
168 I keep your precepts and decrees,  
for all my ways are before you.  
  
169 Let my cry come before you, O Lord;  
give me understanding according to your word.  
170 Let my supplication come before you;  
deliver me according to your promise.  
171 My lips will pour forth praise,  
because you teach me your statutes.  
172 My tongue will sing of your promise,  
for all your commandments are right.  
173 Let your hand be ready to help me,  
for I have chosen your precepts.  
174 I long for your salvation, O Lord,  
and your law is my delight.  
175 Let me live that I may praise you,  
and let your ordinances help me.  
176 I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek out your servant,  
for I do not forget your commandments.

Exodus 20:17

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

## Sermon

With this, we've reached the end. The very final commandment in our draft of ten, the last word, the closing remarks. And this final commandment, thou shalt not covet, it marks the last of the shifts we see and experience in the commandments. First we shifted from a focus on God, to a focus on the neighbor, between 4 and 5. Then, as we progressed from 5 through 9 we've gradually widened our sphere of concern: from the self and the first neighbor, to the spouse and the closest family, and finally to the neighbor, the acquaintance, and the stranger. But here, as we turn to ten, we mark our final, and I think most challenging shift. This is the commandment which moves from our actions—be it stealing, murder, adultery, or lying—to our thoughts. After all, coveting, really, can be a victimless crime of sorts, so long as it never leaves our minds.

I can be desirous of my best friend's closet of beautiful clothes, and my neighbor's shiny new car, and my colleague's successful husband, and that stranger's brilliant, focused, and quiet child until I am absolutely green with envy, rotting from the inside out. And so long as those words are never spoken, the only one to suffer, really, is me. And, in fact, if you're really good at being civil and sociable, you can hide that envy behind a mask, so that others do not even perceive its presence.

But, of course, this commandment is here for a reason, right? And it would be enough to have this commandment simply to prevent the rot of our spiritual selves, the havoc greed and envy can wreck on our own selves. And it would also be enough to have this commandment in order to prevent the graver sins of action—because adultery doesn't just happen. The coveting of another person can lead to the action of adultery, the envy of an item can lead to theft, the greed of reputation can cause a lying tongue to betray all our better angels in a flash. And that is well and good, to preserve ourselves and protect against sins of action. But, as you probably know, there's more.

John Calvin has been winning a lot of points with me in his commentary on the commandments, turns out he actually had some pretty thoughtful and wise things to add to the conversation we're all having. And I think of all ten, his comments on this, the final commandment, are my favorite, because he sums it up, in this beautiful and expansive way I couldn't possibly improve on. About this, he writes:

“The purpose of this commandment is: since God wills that our whole soul should be possessed with a disposition to love, we must banish from our hearts all desire contrary to love. To sum up, then: no thought should steal upon us to move our hearts to a harmful covetousness that tends to our neighbor's loss. To this corresponds the opposite precept: whatever we conceive, deliberate, will, or attempt is to be linked to our neighbor's good and advantage.”<sup>1</sup>

I actually want to read that again, because it's a rich few sentences. [repeat]

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<sup>1</sup> Institutes Book II, Chapter VIII, number 49.

In many ways, isn't this the root of all the commandments? 'To be possessed with a disposition to love, and banish from our hearts all desire contrary to love?' And envy, greed, and ill desire, they do just this. They turn our hearts toward the opposite of love, and may indeed lead to our neighbor's loss. Instead, we are called to turn our hearts toward that which will do our neighbor's good and build up their advantage.

Much of the world we all live in seems, to me, to be geared for envy. Here's a dozen beautiful Christmas window displays, just filled with all sorts of shiny things you never knew you wanted. Over there, your neighbor's yard was recently landscaped, and in comparison, yours now looks a bit tatty around the edges. Let me post all the best, most adorable photos of my kids on Instagram, so that all you see of us is contented little sandy blond boys reading in overstuffed chairs and playing quietly with one another. Helping around the house, and never sassing their parents. Aren't you jealous of my perfect children and my clearly superior parenting skills?

But, of course, Christmas windows and newly manicured yards and the photo spread of social media are anything but reality. We cognitively know that, but it's hard to actually force our weird, reptilian brains to believe it. And it simmers into a vast, warm pool of greed and covetousness we're all invited to swim in. Why? I think because it benefits a capitalist system for us all to be just unhappy enough to buy more goods and services, just certain the next thing will make us happy.

But it won't, right? And, if we heed Calvin's warning well, it doesn't make us happy, and it also runs the risk of turning our hearts away from love, away from seeking that which brings about our neighbor's advantage.

So this commandment, do not covet, it's really asking us to rewire our brains, to move them away from the shiny world we live in, and toward the deeper, more meaningful, and obviously much more complicated matters of love. Start with how you think. Don't covet, and from that place we'll gradually be moved toward love.

So, what is there to be done? It's both incredibly simple and possibly the most challenging thing you can do: cultivate an attitude of gratefulness for the life you have been given. When you feel the familiar chord of desire being struck, stop, look around, and take notice of the many gifts God has given to you. It's nothing huge and flashy, it's looking for the small ways gratitude can sneak into your day.

And in this, be honest with others. Even when it feels a little vulnerable.

This week one of John and my favorite friends from seminary came over for dinner. It was a busy week, I was gone for a few days, and things were just a little ragged around our house. So, yes, I made a little time to clean up the bathroom, because I do live with 3 young boys, and the bathroom was gross. And I tried to vacuum a little, just to get the extra dog hair out of the corners of the living room. But honestly, other than that, our house was just

our house. A little unseemly in places, a bit of a mess in others. And John made for dinner exactly what he was going to cook for us anyway, nothing flashy, just some good food. When I have other people over, I try to do just this: I'll give you a clean bathroom and try to limit the clouds of dog hair, but otherwise, welcome to our weird, imperfect little home. And for our friend, I think it was enough. He just wanted to be around people who didn't ask him to take responsibility for a few hours. And we had a delightful time.

Or on Instagram, occasionally, I try to post pictures of myself with no makeup and weird hairdos, and oddball concerns about our ratty yard. Because that's a realistic depiction of where I'm at, and I'd rather be honest than too shiny, I don't want to cause others to covet, and part of that, I think, is presenting my relatively unvarnished self, in love. And, also, not following social media accounts that cause me to covet what I do not have. It's a two way street.

So this week, especially apropos to the holiday we're observing, be honest and grateful, and then share that. Compliment your spouse, notice and praise you children for their hard work, give thanks to God for the full carton of eggs when you wake up in the morning with a hankering for an omelet. Seek to be grateful for the unnoticed and mundane gifts God has given you. Desire, of course, will be there, it always is, but as we seek to be grateful in the small corners of our lives, the thin places where the Spirit of God draws near, we fight against the temptation to let coveting override our thankfulness.

"be possessed with a disposition to love, [and] banish from [your] heart all desire contrary to love. [let] no thought [...] move [your] heart to a harmful covetousness that tends to [your] neighbor's loss. [...] whatever [you] conceive, deliberate, will, or attempt [let it] be linked to [your] neighbor's good and advantage." And in this, I think, God will be pleased. And you will be better off. And your neighbor will be, too. Whether they know it or not.

As I sat down to write my sermon this week, I started to brainstorm what interesting things scripture might have to say about coveting. And what I discovered is that I used up a lot of great stories about coveting in the other nine commandments! The more I looked at it, the more I realized that coveting has been the secret theme of our entire summer. Just think about it: David coveted Bathsheba when he saw her bathing from his roof. His desire propelled him forward into the spiral of stealing, adultery, lying, and ultimately to murder. The whole story of David and Bathsheba might have been nothing more than a blip on the Biblical radar if David hadn't given into coveting the wife of Uriah.

Or, take the story of Naboth and King Ahab from two weeks ago. King Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard, and when Naboth was unwilling to sell it, for a perfectly logical reason, Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, concocted a scheme which included political usury, stealing, false testimony, and murder. If King Ahab had simply not given into his coveting of Naboth's land, we never would have heard this story, and Naboth wouldn't have been stoned to death.

Cain and Able, the story we talked about a few weeks ago for the commandment "You shall not murder," is a classic story about coveting. When

the two brothers went to present their offerings to God, Able's offering of the fattest first born sheep was more pleasing than that of Cain. Cain, clearly covetous of God's praise of Able, went about luring his brother out into a field and murdering him, rather than amend his own sacrifice. His desire for God's praise, and the coveting of the praise Able received, led him down the road to perdition. Again, it's a story that wouldn't have been a story without the initial sin of coveting.

Coveting. It's been here all along. Every single one of these stories is about the main character wanting something that is not theirs to own, be it Naboth's field, Uriah's wife, or Able's praise. Someone wants something that isn't there to have, and in striving to get it, all hell breaks loose. Naboth, Uriah, and Able are all murdered, Bathsheba gets pregnant, kings lie, systems of justice are broken, Queen Jezebel is fed to the dogs, Cain is cast out of his family, and David's child dies. There's a reason coveting is a sin, there's a reason it makes the list of the Ten Commandments.

Now, aside from coveting, the other thing all of these stories have in common is a unique antidote. The antidote in each of these stories, I would propose, is gratitude. If David had been grateful for the wife he already had, satisfied to stay in his own house, he might not have given into his covetous behavior toward Bathsheba. If Ahab had been grateful for the fields and lands he already owned, or even simply satisfied with another field, he wouldn't have given into coveting the land of Naboth and walking down the rosy path to his murder. If Cain had been truly grateful for the crops God had given to him, he might have presented his best offering and been praised accordingly, thus

avoiding coveting Able's praise and murdering his brother out of jealousy. Gratitude. It's not always easy, but it's a heck of a lot healthier than the outcomes we've seen from coveting!

Today's scripture reading is in many ways the coup de maitre of all stories about coveting. It's the start of it all, the very root of our own fallen-ness and sinful behavior. I'm talking, of course, about that famed apple. Adam and Eve are, together, walking through the garden of Eden. Eden is, in all respects, a paradise. It's filled with animals and birds, beautiful plants, and trees that are described as both pleasant to look at and good for food. Adam and Eve have one another for companionship, they have all they could ever need to eat and drink, and they don't need to tend the garden in order to cultivate food. God walks with them in the garden, as a friend. It truly is an idyllic existence: all play and companionship, no work or anxiety. But, then, of course, it was too good to be true.

That evening, while out exploring their new home, Adam and Eve came across the serpent. This wily serpent was the sneakiest and most underhanded of all the creatures, and he struck up a conversation with the two humans. "Oh, hello, Adam and Eve. Out for an evening stroll? Find any new, delicious berries? Well, isn't that wonderful that God gave you this whole garden for food? What's that? God didn't give you the whole garden? You're not supposed to eat from that tree? But look at it! It's beautiful to see, and the fruit is good for eating. God just doesn't want you to eat it because God knows it will make you wise and all knowing, and God can't be having that!"

So, Adam and Eve are convinced. They look at the tree, and it is indeed beautiful to look at, and the fruit looks good for eating. They give into their desire and eat of the fruit. Together, mind you. Eve often gets blamed for this mess, but let us not forget that this was an action undertaken by the two of them. The rest of the story, as they say, is history. God comes upon Adam and Eve cowering in a bush, ashamed by their own nakedness. Hurt and angry, God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden and condemns them to live a life of toil and struggle, cursing them to work to grow their food from the land, informing them that they will sorrow as they bring children into a harsh and unforgiving world. This story, whether you hear it as a true occurrence, a creation myth, or a legend which explains why we are the way we are, it's a desperately sad story. It's the moment where we are cut off from God, no longer able to walk in the garden as friends. It's the time when we come to see our existence through the lens of hard work and toil, and we see that we bring our children into a world of pain and anxiety. All of this because Adam and Eve saw the forbidden fruit, coveted it because it was beautiful and tasty, and gave into their reckless desires.

Now, let me just point out a few important details. Quite often, we image that this forbidden fruit was, in some way, the most beautiful fruit of Eden. More desirable than all the other trees. If you go back and read Genesis, that's actually just not the case. All of the trees are described in exactly the same way, "pleasant to look at" and "good for eating." There's nothing special about this tree, except for the fact that God asked Adam and Eve not to eat it. Second, look at the way the serpent tricks Adam and Eve into believing that God is holding out on them. Adam and Eve have literally every good thing,

right at their fingertips. They want for nothing, and yet, the serpent makes them feel as if their existence is sub-par, less than it could be, if only they would eat the fruit and be wise. Adam and Eve, in this moment, chose to trust the lies of the serpent, rather than trust the God who has provided so fully for them, the God who has been their friend in the garden. This story is, at its heart, a story about coveting versus gratitude.

The serpent's trick is that he gets Adam and Eve to look away from the plethora of other trees that are beautiful to look at and good for eating. The serpent gets the two of them to disregard all that they have to be grateful for, and instead focus on the one thing they have been told is not theirs. The tricky serpent opens the door to coveting, and he helps Adam and Eve walk right down the path of indulging their desires without restraint. There could not be a clearer illustration of the problem of coveting. When we are blinded to the good things around us, all that which we have to be grateful for, we are liable to give in to the urge to want what we cannot have, and giving into unrestrained desire brings with it consequences beyond our initial understanding. I am sure Adam and Eve, David, King Ahab, and Cain would all love to go back in time and undo their initial coveting. In fact, all of those characters later repent of sinfulness, but it's too late. The damage has been done, and they must live outside of Eden, with the death of a child, a brother, a soldier, a neighbor on their hands, with the full knowledge of the consequences brought by giving in to their unrestrained desire.

Now, I want to make something clear. Coveting is not the same thing as desire. It's normal for us to look at the world around us and desire that which

is not ours. It's a perfectly human response to desire a yard as well kept and beautiful as your neighbors. It's understandable that you might find someone else's wife attractive. It's rational that you find all sorts of items at Costco you never knew you wanted! Stacks of books and a shiny watch and a monstrous television and stunning bottle of wine. Desire is a part of our lives as humans. Coveting, on the other hand, is when that normal desire, the wants we experience every day, when those become unrestrained. When all we can think about is our desire for a new car or a new house. Coveting doesn't even mean we always give in to the desire to take that which is not ours, coveting happens at the moment when our desire for something else overshadows our gratitude for that which God has already given us. It's the moment when wanting a larger television makes us resentful of the smaller television we already have. When Ahab looks out his window, sees Naboth's beautiful vineyard, and no longer values his own land. Coveting is Adam and Eve in the garden, when they are no longer grateful for the entire forest of fruit they have been given, because they only want the one, forbidden fruit. We covet when desire trumps gratitude.

In the scripture stories, from Eden to King David to King Ahab and beyond, coveting is the gateway through which a whole range of other bad choices sneak in. I don't think that coveting in our day to day existence regularly leads to adultery, murder, and stealing. But, like all of these stories, coveting can bring us into a state of mind where we have little regard for the gifts we've been given. Giving into unrestrained desires, whether we talk about it as "the grass is greener on the other side" or "keeping up with the Joneses," it makes us feel like nothing we have is good enough. It may not lead to murder, but it

can lead to a resentment of our friends who have what we want, a frustration with the life we've been given, and a generally cruddy feeling about our own lives. Coveting is insidious because it starts small, but the effect can be crushing.

So, what is there to be done? It's both incredibly simple and possibly the most challenging thing you can do: cultivate an attitude of gratefulness for the life you have been given. When you feel the familiar chord of desire being struck, stop, look around, and take notice of the many gifts God has given to you. Living a life of gratitude is countercultural. We live in a society that teaches us to want more and better and never be satisfied with what we have. But, as Christians, we believe that God cares for us. It's countercultural for us to actively seek out ways of being grateful for the life God has given us. It's nothing huge and flashy, it's looking for the small ways gratitude can sneak into your day. It's in these little places where we meet God. So this week, compliment your spouse, notice and praise your children for their hard work, give thanks to God for the full carton of eggs when you wake up in the morning with a hankering for an omelet. Seek to be grateful for the unnoticed and mundane gifts God has given you. Desire, of course, will be there, it always is, but as we seek to be grateful in the small corners of our lives, the thin places where the Spirit of God draws near, we fight against the temptation to let coveting override our thankfulness. Let us become the thankful people of God.