

Thou Shalt Not Covet

God can be hard to figure out. As my mother Janice has put it in my hearing, “God sure is good at keeping secrets.” Our reading from Ephesians would agree. On multiple occasions, it speaks of the mystery of God’s will. It’s not that God is inconstant. God is steady as you go. Our reading from Ephesians refers to God’s eternal purpose in Christ, after all. God has a purpose and a plan and holds to them. But our knowledge and apprehension of God’s purpose and plan can be quite lacking. The writer of Ephesians today acknowledges that he’d still be in the dark were not for a special revelation of God; perhaps the revelation of the Holy Spirit the writer later says the holy apostles and prophets themselves received. The point is that God can be hard to figure out and is good at keeping secrets.

This might be one of the reasons the Bible says we each have been created in the image of God. We too, after all, can be hard to figure out. I once sat with the children of a dying father who had often said to them, “Do as I say and not as I do.” Most often he said this when, staying home himself, he sent his wife and kids to church and Sunday school. Years later his children were still trying to diagnose the disconnect. How could someone be so adamant and insistent about that which they didn’t practice themselves? Someone was hard to figure out.

I also think of what I’ve heard the children of emotional distant moms and dads say. How could someone demand so much and give so little? How could someone be so tough and yet find it so hard to say, “I’m proud of you” or “I love you?” Someone was a mystery; hard to fathom. But as we sometimes image God with our complexity and ambiguity, it must also be said that we are not nearly as complex and mysterious as our Maker. Sometimes, we’re pretty easy to figure out; being anything and everything but a secret.

Turning now to our reading from Matthew, I’d put King Herod the Great in the easy to figure out category. As he quizzes wise men, priests, and scribes, as he prepares to murder all the children of Bethlehem two years old and younger, King Herod the Great is pretty transparent. Part of this is surely meant to serve the purposes of St. Matthew’s narrative. As St. Matthew writes of how wise men today announce that Jesus is born King of the Jews, it’s necessary to illustrate why a change of leadership is required. King Herod the Great certainly steps up to the plate in this regard. He’s bloodthirsty and power hungry. He’s insecure; fearing he might lose the crown which is not his by God’s will, but by Roman appointment instead. Herod is a leader who illustrates what the gospels have in mind when they say Jesus helped those who were like sheep without a shepherd. He’s self-interested and rapacious; looking for himself rather than the flock for which he is

to care. He'll stop at nothing to keep stealing away the honor and the glory, the power and the privilege, that rightfully belong to Jesus; the one born King of the Jews. Again, King Herod the Great isn't a mystery. He's a poster boy for why the ninth and tenth commandments call us not to covet. If only God were this transparent. If only God were a little less mysterious; a little less wholly and completely other.

Right about now, it's only natural for us to want to bring God down to our level. Still in the midst of a global tragedy that has now claimed nearly 1.9 million lives, we likely need no help at all connecting the dots when our reading from Ephesians keeps associating mystery with God. To be sure, as we remember during this short season of Christmas, God has drawn much, much closer and has become much, much more relatable in the birth of Jesus Christ. But even with God becoming flesh and pitching a tent among us in Jesus Christ, even with the ongoing presence and counsel of the Holy Spirit, God can still be hard to figure out. Veiled in ongoing mystery, the abiding plan and purpose of God can still be hard to fathom. And even covetous Herod the Great can remind us of this.

Just think about it! In Exodus chapter twenty, just verses before handing down the commandments that bid us not to covet, God says, "Look! I'm not playing around. You better listen and absorb what I'm about to reveal. You better be the priestly kingdom and holy nation I have in mind because I, I am a jealous God." What's this about? We're not to covet, but God can be jealous. Is this another case of "do as I say and not as I do?" Need I say it—God can be mighty mysterious. God can be so, so hard to figure out. No wonder our reading from Ephesians says divine revelation and the ministrations of the Holy Spirit are required if anything like faith seeking understanding is to emerge on our part. But here, at least, as in God's jealousy and the commandments against coveting, the mystery and the confusion are not so hard to crack.

The key lies in a subtle, but essential difference between what it means to covet and what it means to be jealous. To covet is to crave what is not rightfully yours; as in the honor and the glory, the power and the privilege, that belong not to Herod the Great, but to Jesus instead. But to be jealous—this is something different. To be jealous is to resent and resist that which steals away what is rightfully yours; as in the faith, the devotion, and the obedience of those you've rescued from slavery in Egypt and now bless with The Ten Commandments. And of course, it's not just Israel of old which is God's beloved and cherished possession. It's all of us, the entire creation, who belong to God. As the psalmist

rightly says, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it."

Page | 3 As the Creator of heaven and earth, the reason for all that is, God can't covet as King Herod the Great covets what belongs to Jesus. Everyone and everything belong to God. Everyone and everything are rightfully God's; making it impossible for God to covet. But, as Exodus chapter twenty and other scriptures tell us, God can be jealous; desiring the return of that which has been wrongfully stolen away. And I think this might give us a handle on how to proceed as the coronavirus and other villainous forces continue to steal away those we love ourselves and who God loves even more.

I mean: When there's a breakup or parties in a relationship aren't as together as is desirable, don't flowers often make an appearance? The answer is yes! If this weren't so, Barbara Streisand and Neil Diamond wouldn't have had a massive hit with "You Don't Bring Me Flowers." When hearts have been broken, when distance has entered a relationship or remains in a relationship, those aroused to jealousy often try to woo their beloved back or on to the next stage in their relationship in some fashion or another. And quite notably, today's readings tell us God is no different; busting out flowers and chocolate of heavenly origin when faith, hope, and love are variously stolen away from him.

Just go down the list. When false gods and other religions stole away the nations represented by the wise men in our reading from Matthew, we're informed that God wooed them back through the advent and subsequent movements of a star. The same nations were earlier wooed to praise and the offering of gifts when God restored the fortunes of Jerusalem according to our reading from Isaiah. And in our reading from Ephesians, it's St. Paul and other likeminded missionaries who God uses to woo faith, hope, and love out of the nations when the wise men and their star have receded from view. Quite clearly, there's a pattern here. It adds up to this. Unlike those for whom Neil Diamond and Barbara Streisand once sang, we don't have to worry that God isn't going to bring us flowers anymore. Even in the midst of the coronavirus and whatever else that steals away that which jealousy rightfully wants back, God's going to bring us flowers; flowers that speak to place we all have in God's heart; flowers that affirm that we do all have a continuing place in God's unfolding plan and purpose. In, by, and through the Holy Spirit, let's notice these flowers and tell each other about them. It will help us to continue to know, believe, trust, and proclaim that love for all, love forever and ever, has come in Jesus Christ. Amen!