

Contentment in Community
February 20, 2011
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Exodus 20:14-17
Hebrews 13:1-6

Do you remember those television commercials sponsored by a financial services company in which people walked around with large, three-dimensional numbers under their arms?

They showed people striding purposefully down a busy urban street or strolling across a lovely park. They all had these pleasant smiles on their faces, perhaps because their numbers were so big. Those numbers represented their retirement nest eggs.

Do you remember these ads? Were you struck, as I was, at how big the numbers were? Six and seven figure numbers, large seven figure numbers, indicating that these very happy people had \$1 or \$2 or \$5 or \$10 million socked away.

Have you noticed those ads aren't running on TV any longer, post the great recession?

There was a time, before the great recession, when some financial advisors encouraged clients to think about what their "number" was. What would it take in the bank for them to retire, perhaps to "do good" in the world. What was the price tag for happiness? How much is enough?

Then two Princeton University economists jumped on board with research that asked a similar question. They asked 450,000 Americans what annual household salary was needed for them to feel emotional well being on a day-to-day basis.

Do you remember the number? \$75,000 a year for a household. Anything above that didn't necessarily buy more happiness, at least according to their methodology. For context, about 70% of U.S. households earn less than that. But, lest we think we are suffering too badly, half the world lives on less than \$2 a day per person.

So, what do you think? What does contentment look like for you?

How much is enough for you to have? That last question – how much is enough for you or for me – cannot stand alone, of course. It begs another question. How much is

enough for my neighbor? What is just in the balance of wealth and material comfort in society? Do we live in an every-person-for-himself-or-herself world? Or should we base our definition of what is enough for us on what we think others should rightfully have to live a dignified life?

As we turn today to the last four of the ten commandments, those questions lie just beneath the surface of God's instructions for right relationships, and how Christ reinterpreted the commandments in the New Covenant.

God gave Moses two tablets that day on Mt. Sinai, as we have covered in the past two weeks. One focused on God's claim on us, God's adopted children, and what that adoption requires of us in relationship to God. The second tablet framed how we are to love God in how we live together as people. It included these commands:

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife ... or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Each of these instructions stands on its own, but they also go together. They require us to consider whether we are content with what we have. They also forbid us from increasing what we have by taking from our neighbor. And, especially in light of Jesus Christ's teachings, life, death and resurrection, these instructions are to inform not just our behaviors as individuals but all aspects of life together in community – in commerce, in public policy, in national affairs and in international relations.

So let us take a brief look at each of these four commandments.

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Let's begin with the commandment about adultery. Historical scholars point out that this commandment was written to apply in a highly patriarchal social structure. Seen through such a male-dominated lens, this commandment could be most narrowly interpreted as to treat women as property.

A contemporary Judeo-Christian reading involves a more comprehensive view. In that view, this commandment deals with the gift of human sexuality and what we are to do with it as individuals living in community.

“... sexuality is enormously wondrous and enormously dangerous,” Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes of this commandment. “The wonder of sexuality is available in a community only if it is practiced respectfully and under discipline. The danger of sexuality is that it is capable of evoking desires that are destructive of persons and communal relations.”¹

Brueggemann uses a key word there when he brings the issue of desire into the discussion. That expands the issue beyond just physical engagement in sex. He seems to be reading this commandment through a New Testament lens, specifically Christ’s admonition in the gospel of Matthew (5:27-28): “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery.”

This week, in a discussion of the commandments on Facebook, two members of the Caldwell community put this in even more accessible language. I should note they were discussing the commandments in general – not this one in particular – but their exchange applies nonetheless.

One person replied to my invitation for thoughts and questions with this comment.

“I was always bothered by the idea that if you thought about it, it was the same as if you did it!”

Another member of the Caldwell family gently responded: “Maybe that is God’s way of letting us know that what we feed will grow.”

Wise words.

The next commandment is not nearly as subtle or nuanced. “You shall not steal” leaves no room for misinterpretation. It condemns the greed and envy that lies within humanity and corrupts all of its systems – economic, political, social and others.

Last year the sequel to the 1980s movie, *Wall Street*, came out after much anticipation. The most oft-quoted line in that movie came from the mouth of the corporate takeover

¹ New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Exodus. P 848

artist Gordon Gekko, who tried to convince a room full of shareholders that “Greed is good.”

In the sequel, Gekko is out of prison, having served his time for corporate fraud. He regains his notoriety and finds himself, of all places, lecturing to a hall full of MBA students. He interprets the real-life facts that led to the real-life recession we are all still feeling. His one-line explanation: “Greed got greedier.”

Gekko is right. Even the best, most moral bankers lost perspective. I was there. The financial industry thought it could make 2 + 2 equal 5 because risk in the system had been neutered. We were wrong.

Millions of consumers got caught in the bubble. Some failed to read the fine print, acting on bad advice by their banker or just failing to think for themselves, they bought far more things and far more house than they could afford. Some lied about their income. Too many bankers looked the other way and accepted the fee for writing the mortgage.

Here in Mecklenburg County, 14% of homes now have mortgages that are larger than the value of the home. Mortgage holders in almost half of all homes in the county have less than 5% equity in their home. Meanwhile, our unemployment rate remains stubbornly high.

It is as if we are walking through the parted Red Sea, with walls of pending foreclosures stacked up to our right and our left. They are not likely to stay that way. We, as a community, will have to sort out how we keep our collective head above the water when they come crashing down. What is just? Who should shoulder the cost of getting us out of this mess? (If you want to do something about it, see Jeff Sinn and get involved in the HELP social justice effort.)

Does the commandment about stealing speak to any of this specifically? No. But it does direct us – as individuals and in our financial and economic practices - to be content with what we can afford, and to be on guard against greed in our systems and in our souls. It instructs businesses to be content with a reasonable profit, rather than one that is extracted from the hands of those who can least afford it.

The prophet Jeremiah said “Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper room by injustice.”

One more quick word about another way we steal. Evidence of how we are stealing God’s creation from our children abounds. This week, our office manager Leslie Gipple

attended a meeting of church administrators. The topic was how churches can maximize their recycling efforts. We can do more here at Caldwell.

A nugget that Leslie passed on from the meeting: We are using up the world's resources at a rate that is sustainable – if the world were 40% larger than it actually is, if we had that many more natural resources to consume. We don't, of course. We have one world, not 1.4 worlds.

As with commandments seven and eight, the ninth commandment also speaks to right relationships in community. It directs any society to ensure there is a place where the truth is told, a place left free of corrupting voices and influences, a place where justice is upheld. And it calls us as God's people to protect the most valuable possession of our neighbor – his or her reputation.

As with the commandment about stealing, this one jabs directly at something we have all done at one time or another – tearing someone else down to build ourselves up or for even worse reasons.

Our denomination's 1998 study catechism commends this learning: "I should not say false things against anyone for the sake of money, favor or friendship, for the sake of revenge or for any other reason."

Last Sunday about 30 folks gathered to watch and discuss some of the Eyes on the Prize civil rights documentary. This commandment may conjure up some of what we heard and saw from the 1950s in this nation. For example, there was the white supremacist who defended segregation by saying that those favoring integration would raise up a mongrel horde from the mixing of the races.

In our times, we hear the same hate when our gay and lesbian friends are torn down as child abusers, sexual deviants and worse. We witness a more subtle discrimination when our denomination asks gays and lesbians to deny their true identity if they want to be church officers. This, too, shall pass, brothers and sisters, and let us pray it passes this year.

And, as with the other commandments about community, we should not limit this one about false witness to our individual dealings. We should hold it out as a standard for our national conduct. One recalls the rumors about weapons of mass destruction as a means for overthrowing a dictator and gaining access to his oil.

Finally, we arrive at the commandment that we are not to covet the things of our neighbors. It hits us squarely in the face again with the question of how much is enough and the expectation that we are to be satisfied with what we have.

In a sense, this last directive puts a bow on the package, doesn't it? Rather than desiring a car as nice, a house as large, a mate as attractive, a reputation as admirable, a salary as comfortable as our neighbor's, it reminds us to trust in the God who will provide what we need. It reminds us that when we step outside of the bond of marriage, when we take another's property or reputation or dignity, when we build up our nation at the cost of others, we turn our backs on our adoption by a God who balances grace with justice.

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I appreciated the responses I got last week when I asked on email and Facebook what you thought or wondered about the commandments. The perspectives were as diverse as the Caldwell community itself.

"God didn't give them as suggestion," one colleague in ministry wrote.

"They were given to help us, not to make us feel guilty," another person said.

"Thank God for salvation by grace," still another person added.

Another colleague in ministry read the last four commandments listed in my email and wrote this: "I am struck by how all these show how individuals look the other way – other spouse, other neighbor's stuff, etc. ... What if God is saying, 'Don't look at these things to fill that hole in your heart. Keep your eyes on me!'"

Our friend Danny Trapp observed, "I am struck by how commonplace the actions referenced in these commandments are in society today." To which another friend added: "So, true Danny. As if discontent is the status of the day."

So there we have it, God's firm guidance on where we are not to look for contentment in this world and, in turn, how we can find it by living in ways that show the kingdom of heaven, and by trusting God who came in Jesus Christ.

I close with the words written in 1930 by the great liberal Protestant preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick for his classic hymn, God of Grace and God of Glory:

Cure Thy children's warring madness,
Bend our pride to Thy control.
Shame our wanton selfish gladness,
Rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
Lest we miss Thy kingdom's goal,
Lest we miss Thy kingdom's goal.

Amen and Amen.