

NO OTHER GODS

Exodus 20:1-6

Second Wednesday in Lent

February 21, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Old Testament lesson is Exodus, chapter 20, verses 1 through 6.

During these middle five Wednesdays of Lent—between Ash Wednesday and Holy Week—we will be considering the Ten Commandments. That means we should cover two per week. But perhaps you noticed already that we are only covering the First Commandment tonight. So maybe we should extend Lent for an extra five weeks. Okay, some of you don't think that's funny. You want Easter to come, and it will at the appropriate time.

We will actually cover the first two parts of the Ten Commandments tonight—the Introduction and the First Commandment. The last nine commandments are really the last eight parts of the Ten Commandments. If you're not sure how the math of that adds up, you can read my article about that in the March newsletter, which will be out on Sunday. Or if you just can't wait, because I know it's so exciting, when you go home tonight, you can read it online at our website.

So the Introduction and the First Commandment: Please stand as you are able for the Scripture reading. From Exodus 20, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ And God spoke all these words, saying,

² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³ "You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christians are polytheists. Let me explain what I mean. A polytheist believes in or worships multiple gods. Polytheist: "poly," meaning "many" or at least "multiple" or "more than one," and "theist," meaning "a believer or worshipper of a god." Christians are polytheists, because we worship multiple gods.

Now, if this were a catechetical sermon on the Apostles' Creed, I would insist that we are *not* polytheists, but monotheists—"mono," meaning "one." When we say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty ... And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord ... [And] I believe in the Holy Spirit ...," we are not confessing polytheism. We worship these three persons, but this is not

NO OTHER GODS (Exodus 20:1-6)

polytheism, because these three persons are united in one divine substance (Athanasian Creed). So if this were a catechetical sermon on the Apostles' Creed, I would insist that Christians are *monotheists*, that is, worshippers of *one* God. But this is not a sermon on the Apostles' Creed; it is a sermon on the First Commandment, so I must insist that we are *polytheists*. We worship *multiple* gods.

Now you might notice the irony that this is exactly what the First Commandment forbids: "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." The First Commandment *forbids* polytheism and *requires* monotheism. When the First Commandment tells us what *should* be, it is entirely monotheistic. But the Ten Commandments do more than merely tell us what *should* be. They also reveal what *is*. And the First Commandment does this in the area of worship. It informs us what *should* be—that we should have one God—and it also reveals to us what *is*—that, in reality, we have multiple gods. This is what the Ten Commandments do. They inform us of the way we should think, speak, and act. And they also cause us to examine ourselves, and thus reveal to us what is.

Let me give you an illustration. If said to you, "Thou shalt not wear the color blue to church," this would do more than simply inform you of what you should not wear. By the way, it is perfectly okay to wear blue to church. I'm just giving you a hypothetical. But the command, "Thou shalt not wear the color blue to church," would also cause you to examine yourselves. How many of you looked down at your clothes to see if you are wearing anything blue? And how many of you noticed my blue tie and thought, *What a hypocrite?* The command caused us to examine ourselves. And the Ten Commandments do the same thing, or at least they should. When our consciences are working correctly, the Ten Commandments cause us to examine ourselves. And this is right. This is one of the functions of the Law.

Our Lutheran Confessions identify three uses, or "functions," of God's Law (*Formula of Concord, Article VI*). That is, we identify three things the Holy Spirit uses the Law to do. And you can remember them by the words "curb," "mirror," and "guide."

First, the Law functions to maintain outward discipline. It curbs bad behavior. It does this, primarily, through the threats of punishment or consequences. The idea is, *If you do this bad thing, then this other bad thing will happen*. And so the Law maintains outward discipline in the world. Scripture does this when it threatens God's judgment on sin. But the Law also performs this function on people whether or not they are Christians. We see it in the functioning of natural law. All the governments of the world pick up on natural law, so they make laws against things like murdering, stealing, and lying. Parents do the same thing in their homes. When you call your sister a bad name, dad takes away your Legos. The threat of punishment maintains a certain degree of outward discipline.

In this way, God's Law functions like a curb along the street that keeps out-of-control vehicles from going off the road and causing damage to property or people. The curb doesn't restrain all out-of-control vehicles, but it does restrain some of them.

A couple years ago I arrived home to find a car in our front yard, or at least on the berm. The driver was giving his story to a police officer, and I never asked him to explain to me what happened; I knew the guy and didn't want to embarrass him any further. But I could discern certain things from what I saw. There were skid marks across the berm, and his front fender was hung up on a stop sign that was now leaning at about 45 degrees. I could see that he lost

NO OTHER GODS (Exodus 20:1-6)

control, hopped the curb, tore up the grass, and crashed into the stop sign. The curb did not completely stop him, but it did slow him down enough that the stop sign was able to actually make him stop. So the curb—with a little assistance from the stop sign—restrained the out-of-control vehicle.

And the Law of God does the same thing too. It maintains outward discipline. It is a curb against bad behavior. When you notice that your neighbor has a really nice snow blower, the Law curbs you from breaking into his garage and taking it. This is the first function of the Law.

But the Law does more. It also reveals to us our own sin. In this way it functions as a mirror. When God's Law says, "Thou shalt do this and thou shalt not do that," it causes us to examine ourselves, and it reveals to us the various ways we have broken God's Law. It reveals to us who we really are. Maybe we didn't steal the snow blower, but the Law reminds us of other things we have taken wrongly, and so it reveals to us that we are thieves. In a similar way, the First Commandment reveals that we are, in practice, polytheists. When it says, "You shall have no other gods before Me," we ask ourselves, *Do I have any other gods?* So the Law functions like a mirror and reveals to us who we really are. This is the second function of the Law.

And third, the Law functions as a guide. Once we are regenerated, the Law continues to inform us how we should live. It promotes good outward actions, so in this way it is similar to the first function. But it also promotes right inward thinking. This is different from the first function. It also doesn't threaten us with punishments. It simply informs regenerate Christians what is good and pleasing to our heavenly Father. It functions like a guide who says, "Go east on 32nd Avenue, take a right at Chestnut Street, and go south about two and a half blocks." This is the third function of the Law. It guides.

So the Law does these three things: it functions as a curb to maintain outward discipline, a mirror to lead us to the knowledge of our sins, and a guide by which we regulate and direct our lives.

And it's this second function that reveals to us that we are polytheists. God says, "You shall have no other gods before Me." So we examine our own lives and we consider what it means to have a god. We ask, "What does this mean?" And the catechism wisely teaches us to answer: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." This explains what it means to have a god. Whatever you fear, that is your god. Whatever you love, that is your god. Whatever you trust in, that is your god.

In Exodus 20, where God himself explains the First Commandment, he says, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them." (20:4-5a) This is what we call "crass idolatry"—when you physically kneel down and display devotion to some statue of a god. You and I probably aren't tempted to do this. It would seem kind of silly. So we tend to look at people in the Old Testament as foolish and naïve. We look at them with pride and disdain, thinking, *These people are so primitive. Do they really think that statue is going to save them?* But if they could look at us, they would probably say, *These people are so modern. Do they really think that fancy house is going to make them happy?* And their criticism would be just as valid as ours.

In the ancient world it was far more tempting to worship carved idols. This is because they realized their lives were subject to forces outside of their control. If there was a drought in their

NO OTHER GODS (Exodus 20:1-6)

land, many people would die. A hundred miles over, they might have plenty of rain and a bumper crop. But if they don't want to share, or if they can't carry it all over the mountains and across a few rivers, people in the dry region are going to die. There were no grocery stores where you could buy whatever you want and no world trade markets to balance the crops. If we have a drought the grass turns brown and a few of the farmers might go bankrupt. And that's not good. But in the ancient world, if there was a drought, lots of people died, and there wasn't anything anyone could do about it. So they understood perfectly well that their lives were out of their control. And so if there was any chance that worshipping a carved idol could convince the deity that idol represents to send them some rain, they would do it. They understood far better than we do that whether they lived or died was out of their control, so they worshipped anything and everything that might have control over it. To us it seems silly. To them it seemed like survival.

And if they looked at our world and how we live, they would think themselves wise and us foolish. They would see that we worship false gods too. It's just a subtler form of idolatry.

Whatever you fear, that is your god. If you are afraid of spiders, then spiders are a god to you. I know that sounds silly, but let me explain. If you are afraid of spiders, it's probably because you feel like they can destroy you. And it's true that if God doesn't protect you, certain kinds can destroy you. But fear of them is a form of worship that attributes to them ultimate power over your existence. So spiders become a god to you, and a bad god at that. The same thing can be true of all sorts of things, like the weather. It's true that if God does not protect us, the cold here will kill us. So we are wise to install furnaces in our houses. We are also wise to just stay home sometimes. If we are unwise, the cold will kill us. We should be wise, but we should not fear the weather, because fear is a form of worship that attributes ultimate authority over our existence to the weather. And it's true that the weather can kill you. Even if you are wise and you trust in God, the weather can still kill you. But the weather cannot prevent Jesus from raising your body from the dead. So we should not fear that anyone or anything can take something from us that God cannot restore. God is the only one who has ultimate authority over all things. So it is him and him alone whom we should fear.

Now this does not mean we should live in constant terror of God. There is another kind of fear. We can call it "respect" or "child-like fear." It's the kind of fear that recognizes this awesome and all-powerful God is on our side. It's the kind of fear that rejoices when a child sees that mom and dad use their power to protect and provide for them. It's the kind of fear that says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31) This kind of fear worships God by attributing to him ultimate authority over all things and praises him for using his power for our good. We fear God when we recognize him as our heavenly Father. So whatever you fear, that is your god.

And whatever you love, that is your god. Now love is sometimes related to fear. Whatever you fear losing could be what you love. If you fear losing your job, it probably means you either love your job, or, more likely, you love your paycheck. And loving something isn't necessarily idolatry, just like fear isn't necessarily idolatry. Anything you fear, love, or trust in more than God—that is idolatry. So you can and should love your parents, spouse, children, and neighbors, just not above God. But the idolatry we're talking about here probably doesn't have anything to do with loving your parents, spouse, children, or neighbors. More so, it has to do with loving things we should not love.

NO OTHER GODS (Exodus 20:1-6)

If you're not sure what those things are, examine the way you spend your resources, such as your time and money. If your DVR is filled with episodes of *Fixer Upper*, perhaps your house—or the house *want* to have—is your idol. Or look at your browser history. If you are constantly checking your accounts and investments, perhaps money is a god to you. Or look at your closet. If half your T-shirts say “Minnesota Twins” on them, it could mean that you like a certain baseball team just a little too much. Or it could just mean that my family doesn't know what to get me for Christmas, so they keep buying me Twins apparel. But then I think about it a little more, and I realize the reason they don't know what to get me for Christmas is that whenever I want something, I just go buy it for myself, so I never have anything left to ask for. And I see from this that I have made myself to be my own god. I love myself above all things, so I live to satisfy my own desires. Perhaps you can relate. Whatever you love above all things, that is your god.

And whatever you trust in, that is your god. If you believe a fancy new house will make you happy, you are trusting that fancy new house to satisfy you. If you believe your bank account will ensure your security, you are trusting your money to sustain you. If you go into a deep depression whenever your team is eliminated from the playoffs, you were probably born in Minnesota. It also reveals that you were placing your hopes for victory and exaltation in the wrong place. Whatever you trust in for your security, well-being, and happiness, that is your god.

So I hope what you have seen from all this is that we are polytheists. We worship many gods, because we fear, love, and trust in many things besides the one true God. And the basic problem with this is that all these things are incapable of saving us. They are incapable of satisfying us for an eternity. They are unable to sustain our bodies and souls during this life, through death, and into the next. The only person capable of doing that is the one true God, and that is why he commands us to have no other gods before him.

Now I've been attempting to prove to you that we are all polytheists. And from our perspective this is true. We worship many gods. But from God's perspective, we are monotheists. That is, from his perspective, we have but one God. This is because God has made himself to be our God, and none of the false gods we worship are able to make a claim on us that overpowers his claim.

To prove this, let's back up just a little bit. We back up to the Introduction to the Ten Commandments. Before God commands us to have no other gods, he says, “I am the LORD your God” (20:2). That is, God makes himself to be our God *before* he commands us to worship him and him alone. For the Israelites, whom God initially spoke these words to, he did this when he “brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (20:2). This was the great deliverance story in the Old Testament. The people of Israel were slaves in the land of Egypt. But God led them out of Egypt. He made a path through the Red Sea on dry ground. And after the Israelites had safely crossed the sea, God closed the waters and drowned the Egyptian army behind them. God had defeated their oppressors and delivered them from slavery. They found themselves standing free and safe on the other side of the sea. No one was chasing them. No

NO OTHER GODS (Exodus 20:1-6)

one was forcing them to make more bricks. They were free as far as every other nation in the world was concerned. But to God, they now belonged to him. God had rescued them. They were his, and he was theirs. He had become their God.

Shortly after this deliverance, they came to Mount Sinai, and this is where God gave them the commandments. But first he said, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." He declares himself to be their God, and then he commands them to have no other gods before him. This was the great deliverance story of the Old Testament, and this is how God became Israel's God.

This great deliverance story was also foreshadowing a greater deliverance story. In the New Testament, the great deliverance story is the cross, where Jesus Christ, the Son of God in human flesh, purchased us, "not with silver and gold, but with His holy and precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death" (*Small Catechism*, "The Apostles' Creed").

When we examine ourselves in light of the First Commandment, we realize that we worship a great many gods. This is our perspective. But when God looks down, he sees something else. He sees his own dear child whom Christ has purchased with his blood. You did not make God your Father. God made you his child and so became your Father and your God. And it is God's perspective of this that wins out over ours. And this is good.

So now that God has made himself to be our God and Father, he commands us to have no other gods before him. He commands us to fear, love, and trust in him above all things. Because he is the only one worth fearing. He is the only one worth loving. He is the only one worth trusting. For he is the one who has purchased us, he is the one who provides for all our needs, and he is the one who will carry us through this life, through death, and into his new creation. So "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.