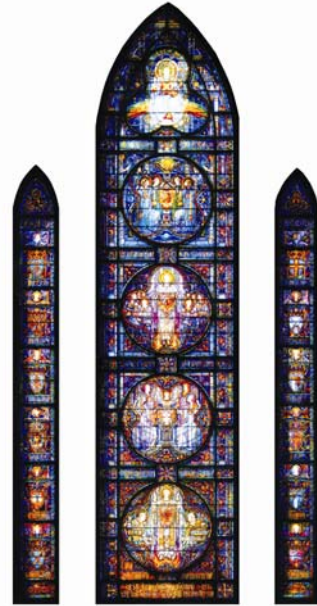


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Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sermons



The Second Commandment: Making God in Our Image

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Exodus 20:4-6
Romans 1:18-25

On a Monday afternoon in the fall of 1987 I was to meet with two long-time members of the church I served in Jamestown, New York. They were successful businessmen. They had asked to meet with me because of their anxiety about an unflattering article that had appeared in the *Buffalo News* concerning our denomination. The meeting was set for four o'clock. I remember I had prepared myself for several hours, ready to answer anticipated objections on the issue (but now I don't even remember what the issue was). They were late. When they knocked on the door - right away - I knew that something was desperately wrong. They looked utterly grief stricken. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"Haven't you heard? The Dow dropped 508 points today. It's the worst day in the history of Wall Street." We never talked about the newspaper article.

Devotion to the stock market is so intense for some, that on that day - Black Monday - at the request of the Pacific Stock Exchange, a suicide watch was placed on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. During the same week in Miami, a long-time speculator who lost large sums in the market's crash walked into the local Merrill Lynch brokerage office and requested to see his broker and the

office manager. He opened his briefcase, took out a handgun, and shot and killed the two men and then turned the gun on himself. A friend commented, "His entire life was devoted to the market, and it collapsed around him." The god that he trusted had let him down.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol...you shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God..." (Exodus 20:4,5) The second commandment prohibits idolatry.

Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth. Under certain circumstances; sports, patriotism, sexual freedom, alcohol, moral principles, family loyalty, physical health, social or intellectual preeminence, and so on are fine things to have around, but to make them the standard by which all other values are measured, to make them our masters, to look to them to justify our life and save our soul is sheer folly. They just aren't up to it.

Do you remember in the Bible the day when Moses descended from the mountain where he'd been so long, carrying the stone tablets on which he claimed the Lord himself had written his everlasting laws? He'd been gone enough days that the people became anxious and frightened and faithless; and in the 32nd chapter of Exodus is this desperate description - the third and fourth verses, listen:

"The people took off their rings of gold and brought them to Aaron, the priest, and he fashioned them into a molten calf, and he said, 'This is your god, O Israel!'"

That scene wouldn't be repeated today; it's not very up-to-date...hardly anyone brings into the church anymore their jewelry to have golden calves made.

There's another way to look at this second commandment, however. The Hebrew word "pesel" need not be translated "idol." In fact, it is more properly rendered "image," a visible representation of Yahweh, the God of Israel. The temptation, then, is not so much the creation of a rival that detracts from Yahweh, but an attempt to locate and thereby domesticate Yahweh in a visible, controlled object. It is an attempt to make God manageable - to cut God down to size. This latter reading of the commandment, which is the more probable, is also more subtle. It does not fear a rival but a distortion of Yahweh's free character by an attempt to locate Yahweh and so diminish something of Yahweh's terrible freedom.

What it all comes down to, in Moses' day and in ours, is that **we cannot own God.**

If you think about it, in our relationship with God there are two kinds of sin: the sin of ignoring God as though he did not exist, and the sin of thinking that we possess God and have some special rights to God's powers and benefits. The first is the sin of secular culture and the second is the sin of religious culture. We are warned away from the first sin, ignoring God, by the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." We are warned away from the second, thinking we possess God, by the second commandment, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image."

You see, we religious people have a way of thinking that God belongs to us. We think of God in certain ways and act out our dealing with God in certain rituals, and before you can say "Westminster Presbyterian Church" we assume that we know all about God and what God wants

and how God behaves. We may not make actual graven images of God, but we do reduce God in our minds to mental images that are just as small and limited.

A four-year-old was busy drawing with her crayons when her mother asked her what she was making. And, she said, "It's a picture of God." Her mother said, "Why, you can't draw God - nobody knows what God looks like." The little girl replied, "Well, when I get through with this picture they will."

That sounds like us. We have each painted a personal, preferential portrait of God as seems most conveniently adjustable to us, leaving out what we don't like, and adding what we think would be nice. For instance: many a Christian is willing to tolerate enemies, but draws the line at turning the other cheek... or else, early in life, runs out of cheeks; many a Christian is willing to walk the first mile but not the second; many a Christian is willing to give God the mind but not the heart or the heart but not the pocketbook; many a Christian is willing to deal honestly, but wants no part of the measure that is pressed down, shaken together, and running over; many a Christian is willing to forgive - but hardly seven times, let alone seventy times seven. Many a Christian takes what appears attractive, applicable and affable from the gospel and simply ignores what isn't. That's worshipping a graven image.

For all too many of us, God is our color, our nationality, our political party and favors our particular brand of religion. God becomes a caricature of ourselves. Paul speaks of such persons in his letter to Rome:

"People knew God perfectly well, but when they didn't treat him like God, refusing to worship him, they trivialized themselves into silliness and confusion so that there was neither sense nor direction left in their lives. They pretended to know it all, but were illiterate regarding life. They traded the glory of God who holds the whole world in his hands for cheap figurines you can buy at any roadside stand. They became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles." (Rom.1:21-23)

The second commandment states that "You shall not make for yourself an idol (or graven image)... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God...." It is God's way of saying, "I will have nothing less than your full devotion, and you will have nothing less than all my love."

There was a certain woman who fell in love with a travel poster. It was a dramatic photograph showing the whitewashed buildings and Byzantine domes of the Greek Island of Santorini, with the shining blue sea behind them. She asked the travel agent for a copy of the poster, and put it up in her breakfast nook, where she would see it every morning. Soon she began to dream of going to the Greek Islands and seeing this fabled view for herself. Each time she received a paycheck she put away a few dollars toward the realization of her dream, and eventually the day came when she flew off to Athens on the first leg of her journey. Because her tour included several days in the city of Athens, she dutifully made the rounds of the sights, but she confessed to a fellow traveler that she was not very much interested in what she was seeing, for she had really come for only one purpose, to see the beautiful scene in Santorini that was captured on her travel poster.

When the tour group left Athens, it traveled by steamer to the ancient island of Mykonos, with its twisting, narrow streets, its unforgettable harbor, its picturesque windmills, and its whitewashed buildings and Byzantine domes. Most of those in the group 'oohed' and 'ahhed' at the glorious sights, and some even began to write poetry the evening they stood on the hill and watched the sun set like a fiery red wafer into the mauve and golden sea. But the woman was unyielding: she had come to see the houses and domes of Santorini.

From Mykonos the tour transported the group to the little island of Paros, where they stayed on the leeward side of the island, in a great hotel overlooking a beautiful bay where the fishermen brought in their catches every evening just before dinner. In the daytime, many of the party lay on the crescent beach stretching around one end of the bay, while others swam in the luminously clear waters, marveling at the beauty of their surroundings. But, the woman rarely left her hotel room. She was dreaming of her special view in Santorini.

Finally the tour arrived at Santorini. The ship sailed into the rim of the enormous volcano on which the city is perched. It was almost dusk, and the sky over the sea looked like a great bank of embers, slowly fading into night. Many people said it was the most beautiful sight they had ever seen. But, the woman rode silently up the hill to the hotel, clutching her dream of the view on the poster. Tomorrow morning, when the sun arose, she would see it. She would have only a few hours in the city, but it would be worth it. She would stand on the parapets at the top of the city and look down across those gorgeous housetops and domes on the poster. Her heart was pounding faster than she had ever known it to pound. She didn't know if she would be able to sleep.

Now, during the night, a great storm off the coast of southern Italy moved into the Aegean Sea, bringing cooler temperatures to the region. As the cold air met the warm seawater, thick vapors rose and spread their murky blanket over everything. When the woman awoke and rushed to her balcony to look out over the view she had longed to see, everything was shrouded in fog. She could barely see the building immediately below her hotel. Later in the day, her heart heavy with disappointment, she sailed with her group toward Crete, where they would catch a plane for home. She had missed everything - all the grandeur and beauty of an entire civilization - by focusing too exclusively on a single image.

Maybe this is why we are warned away from any image of God - even the finest of images. We might fix upon it and miss everything.

Let us pray -

Forgive us, O God, for the limitations we put upon you - for the images that restrict our sense of your all encompassing love and power. Teach us to be less anxious to capture you in our theologies, philosophies and politics, and more willing to risk everything in experience with you. We pray this through Jesus, who understood all of this so much better than we do. Amen.