

Finding Peace with God and Finding Peace with One's Neighbor
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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If you could have anyone's car, home, aptitude or abilities, physical looks, bank account, or you name it, whose would it be? If you answered that questionyou know something about coveting. Coveting is yearning for what someone else has!!! And, notice, it is the last, the 10th commandment. Looking back at the other nine, one might say that coveting pales in comparison with the rest. So, why even mention it?

Our lectionary passage from Exodus speaks about relationship, our covenant relationship to God. Perhaps another word for covenant might be "connectional" - a strange word but that's the word Presbyterians use to describe our church: we are in relationship with one another from the local level to the national church; we rely on our connectedness to keep each other accountable to be our best, to get a bigger picture of the church, and have more ears listening for the Holy Spirit.

So how does that last commandment relate to all this? Well, when we covet, it is not only hard to have a right relationship with God, but it is hard to genuinely relate to one another, to have authentic connections. To covet something of my neighbor's is to turn our relationship into what one theologian called an I-It relationship; objectifying the I-Thou relationship.

Ken Burns' recent series on the Viet Nam War illustrated some of the most powerful and poignant covenant relationships in modern times: between fellow soldiers, between nurses and soldiers. Their commitment, mutual dependency and sense of loyalty went far beyond most of our experiences.

And yet, we all have instances when the connectedness with others is outside the ordinary. My neighbor Sharon exhibited that quality, in a unique and colorful way. I use her as illustration, not because she represents a paradigm of virtue but, as someone far more nuanced, and like most of us, because of her deeply flawed humanity.

A divorced mother, Sharon died twelve years ago, far too early, when, in her late forties, she lost a long battle with metastatic cancer. She left behind three teenagers, and a menagerie of animals: three dogs, two cats, a rabbit, ferret, guinea pig and a pair of doves. She also left a legacy that is still very much alive today!

You see, she lived in a corner house at a busy cross street, where she was a constant fixture, walking her dogs or tending her garden in summer, shoveling her expansive property in winter. She greeted every passing dog by name and chatted up the owners, as well. Her garden was on the original Garden Walk and her botanical wisdom was shared with anyone who asked, and many who didn't. Her decision to turn her tree lawns into extensive gardens became inspiration for dozens of her neighbors! And years later, her former property still bears witness to her labors.

Sharon's advocacy and lobbying resulted in a desperately needed stop sign on her busy corner. And dare anyone blow through that corner without stopping, or they would be met with a loud tirade of expletives.....Should that driver happen to take time to look-up, they would view a dramatic and derogatory hand gesture from a woman whose knee length hair (yes, knee length) was hurriedly affixed on top of her head, while her jumper wore the well-stained badges of her gardening genius.

I once naively corrected one of her two sons whose course language exceeded the limits of a neighborly street-hockey game. My reprimand was met with an even more forceful one from Sharon, who didn't universally subscribe to the "it takes a village" school of raising children.....Yet, in truth, she would have just as strongly defended any one of OUR children, her dedication to our neighborhood was that fierce. Sharon represented the far from perfect journey toward applying those covenant commandments, while offering immeasurable contributions to our neighborhood.

So, how do WE keep "the demons of our lesser gods" in check?

Often, it is by attending church regularly or participating in activities sponsored by our church, whether it be education, music programs, mission outreach, committee work, or simple fellowship. Connecting with others!

So, let us consider not just that ONE commandment but the Ten Commandments. Tom Yorty noted quite perceptively that people are averse to preaching on the Ten Commandments, presumably because of the negative language involved, ignoring that this was a traditional form of legal documentation in the ancient world. And, yes my initial reaction fit that description to a tee. Yet, as Jesus makes clear, when the commandments are shorn of their judicial language they are seen to be ideals of the most positive nature: love God unreservedly, AND love your neighbor as yourself.

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation we are reminded that Martin Luther based his 99 theses on a return to Biblical values - during a time when the church had veered away from eternal, universal truths and was serving the interests of those in power at the expense of the rest of society. I repeat, during a time.....

The Ten Commandments was that occasion when God's people realized that their life - in community - had to be grounded in values and truths that transcended self-interest or might makes right. The commandments are God's gracious gift to the people, by which the people are provided with the means to RESPOND to God's love.

It takes us beyond the covenant described in Genesis, where God acts and promises, and human beings are simply the passive recipients. Exodus introduces the concept of mutuality and conditionality. Both parties have a stake in the agreement.

Jesus distinguished between the spirit of the law and the letter of the law. Focusing on the letter alone leads to legalism and ridiculous abuses. Focusing on the PURPOSE of the law, to establish order and boundaries so that human life and relationships can flourish, gives a holistic perspective on the Ten Commandments.

This all sounds quite rule-bound. But, make no mistake. As Presbyterians, we LOVE rules, structure and order. As John McCain recently reminded us about Congress: there needs to be "regular order". There even is a Presbyterian motto, "decently and in order". As moderator-elect of the WNY Presbytery I will be in St. Louis next weekend, learning HOW to maintain regular order for our quarterly meetings that clergy and lay representatives attend.

Given the nature and gravity of the problems in the world, one might ask - how relevant is this? Taking on the duties as moderator of a church that has chosen to be in a committed relationship with every level of the church is an honor and privilege. I am thankful to be sharing work with lay and clergy leaders, from whom I have learned and grown and strengthened my faith (though it can, at times, be hard work). This, rather than being under the authority of a single person or where there is no clearly defined leadership.

Presbyterians take seriously covenant relationships! Likewise, the structure of our Presbyterian denomination is based on a system of checks and balances to safeguard the rootedness of the church in Biblical values. Our regional or Presbytery meetings ensure the representation of all churches and reinforce the concept of the denomination as a connectional church.

A primary role for the Presbytery is to oversee the nurture and ordination of candidates to the ministry. That function is carried out by the Committee on Preparation for Ministry - our own Judith Bryan went through this process. (Both Cornelia Dopkins and I have served on that committee). Another major function is the installation of clergy to their congregations, with whom they establish covenant relationships. The Presbytery also has a special Committee on Ministry to help maintain connections to each of the 50 churches in our Presbytery, and ensure that those congregations and their pastors remain healthy and productive. (Bill Gray, Karen Keaton and I have all served on this committee for several terms. LaVera Johnson recently was recruited to offer her wisdom in HR.)

Of course our national General Assembly meets bi-annually to see that our denomination stays current, relevant, and true to our core values in a changing world. These shared experiences impact churches large and small.

As Presbyterians, being a church that embraces "decently and in order", we have a provision in our Book of Order called the Administrative Commission for working with churches that are in turmoil, or exiting our denomination, or closing. I have served on no fewer than 6 of those committees. Our own church had a Commission during the tumultuous transitional period between Tom Stewart's leadership and Tom Yorty's, to assist us during a period of grief and change.

While Administrative Commissions are rarely warmly welcomed by congregations, several congregations have benefited from the structure and direction provided by the Commissions. When churches are open to new direction and changed perspectives, they often evolve to a healthier and revitalized position. This has enabled them to look beyond mere survival or petty conflicts to renewing their commitment to collective worship.

I mention these to illustrate the challenge of living faithful to our values. We, as churches, like individuals, are works-in-progress, never achieving perfection but always with the aspirational goals, values, truths, stories to guide us when we're between a rock and a hard place and need courage and inspiration.

As our local Presbytery witnesses the closing of one more church (Franklinville) we see the impact of the massive shrinkage of traditional, mainline Protestant churches. The lack of human and financial resources for aging building infrastructures makes sustaining these churches increasingly an exhausting and beleaguering challenge. While a merger with another Presbyterian Church is often the consideration of last resort, increasingly congregations are becoming more pro-active about their options. So, is this all mostly bad news? I think not!

We have many moving examples of core groups of members deepening their commitments to both maintaining their church body AND carrying out mission. One small rural church has spearheaded a community garden for those with subsistence incomes, and they have done so with a vacancy in their pulpit!

Recently, our Presbytery has chosen to have regional gatherings of four branches. The outcome is that members of different churches are connecting or reconnecting with others. More importantly, these branches are pursuing mission projects together, addressing needs that wouldn't be

contemplated by churches with fewer than 30 members. The Presbytery's smallest church, Bethel in Lackawanna, has found worshipping collectively with others, particularly rewarding.

Back to those ten commandments - most of us are probably at 80-90% adherence. That final one on coveting still trips me up - what about you? Like me, do you ever find yourself leaving a friend's home saying, "if only I had their flair for decorating or had an extraordinary garden like their's"? Or, when I visit my friend's dress shop in Medina how many pieces of jewelry or articles of clothing am I still coveting, even days later!

Of course, when we covet we turn ourselves and our neighbors into objects. We run the risk of worshipping idols/ things in this materialistic culture. We completely miss the blessing that gratitude bestows when we remember that all good things come from heaven above.

We are challenged to recognize our imperfect natures, whether as a denomination or as individuals! We must remember that God's covenant was with the people of Israel, collectively. Unlike those who served together in Vietnam, we sometimes forget our mutual dependency.

Years ago, in 1982, The Syracuse Cultural Workers, published a poster suggesting How to Build Community. It is as relevant today as it was then. Here's a sampling of their ideas:

Turn off your TV Leave your house Know your neighbors
Plant Flowers Fix it even if you didn't break it Honor Elders

Ask For Help When You Need It Sing Together
Turn Up The Music Turn Down The Music
Listen Before You React To Anger Mediate A Conflict
Seek To Understand

Of course the difference between this list and the 10 commandments is that there are no "Thou Shalt Nots" in The Syracuse Workers' list. We are given POSITIVE directives. And, as imperfect as she was, my neighbor Sharon, actually modeled most of those.

As humans we are free agents and can choose what is right and good, or wrong and bad. We need checks and balances, commandments, relationships, connections that keep us accountable to one another. This is all "the stuff" of being Presbyterian.

Rules, laws and boundaries, rather than restricting us, make it possible to realize our full potential, enabling our best decisions, living fully in our covenant relationships.

AMEN