

NOT FOR SALE

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22

***“In the temple [Jesus] found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves,
and the money changers seated at their tables.***

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple...”

John 2:14-15a

There’s a lot of talk about the Ten Commandments these days. Mostly it takes the form of a debate about whether or not they ought to be posted on courthouse walls and engraved into stone monuments on town squares.

I wonder, though, if those who are so eager to publicly honor the Ten Commandments would still be so eager if they truly paid attention to what they say.

I’m thinking about one commandment in particular when I say that. It’s the one that’s probably the most neglected of all. It’s the one that most people are inclined to acknowledge with a wink and a promise, nothing more.

I’m talking about Commandment Number Ten: “You shall not covet.”

Here’s how it goes: **“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”** [Exodus 20:17]

Of course there’s a lot of cultural baggage, here. To begin with, the Tenth

Commandment seems to be directed to only half the population: the men. It also references types of property none of our families have kept for generations.

Slavery? Really? It's been 150 years since the Emancipation Proclamation, and that so-called "peculiar institution" is morally abhorrent.. I'd also be pretty surprised if any of us sitting here today have our hearts strangely warmed by the longing to own an ox or a donkey.

That very word "covet" is a strange and archaic one. It's almost completely gone out of fashion. There's only one place, anymore, you hear the word used. You may hear it tonight if you watch the Academy Awards ceremony. You know: "This coveted award..." (Hardly sounds like a bad thing at all, does it?)

What do you think it says about a commandment if its principal verb is a word nobody uses anymore? Do you think it might indicate that this commandment is just a trifle neglected?

Sure it does. There's a whole lotta coveting going on in our culture, and nobody seems to care!

Which makes this whole idea of covetousness a first-rate moral challenge. The type of property we lust after may have changed, but the flaw in the human heart is the same. You can't open a magazine, or turn on the TV, or go web-surfing, or even take a ride on public transit, without seeing a whole lot of

images of things you're supposed to covet. That's what advertising is: an invitation to covetousness.

Somehow I don't think the Chamber of Commerce would be so enthusiastic about the Ten Commandments monument proposed for the town square if they realized how Commandment Number Ten could undermine their business.

Covetousness is a principal enemy of happiness. Think about it. One way you and I could be a whole lot happier in this life is if we'd stop coveting. It's as simple as that! If you don't covet a blessed thing, it means you're content.

Everything you've already got is just fine — who'd want to buy anything more?

We heard, as our second lesson today, a reading from the Gospel of John in which covetousness has a central place. You may not have realized it on first hearing, but it does.

The passage, of course, is that famous story of Jesus' "cleansing of the Temple." It's a troublesome passage for a lot of Christians because it seems to show the Lord behaving in a way that's out of character.

To put it bluntly, Jesus loses his cool. He becomes very angry, and takes that anger out on people around him. He overturns the tables of the moneychangers. He makes a whip out of cords and drives off the sacrificial

animals — the sheep and the goats — that are for sale in the Temple courtyard.

By the way, there's no reason to think Jesus is brandishing his whip at any *people* who are there. There are a lot of classical paintings of this scene, by many great artists, and most of them get this detail wrong. It's certainly dramatic to portray Jesus brandishing a whip and the moneychangers cowering and fleeing in terror, but there's no reason to think Jesus was threatening any human being with bodily harm.

The Greek text is vague on that point. It says Jesus **“found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple.”**

The question is, what does John mean by “all of them”? Is it just the livestock, or is it the livestock dealers and the moneychangers too?

The key to answering that question, I think, is in the phrase “making a whip of cords.” It's not like he came into the Temple courtyard carrying a weapon. He made his whip on the spot, out of rope. He did so for a very practical reason: to drive the animals out. The whip of cords was something any shepherd would make and use, as a tool for moving his animals along.

So what is it about the activities going on in the Temple courtyard that makes Jesus so angry, that leads him to make such a bold and dramatic public

gesture?

There are three things at least.

The first is the sale of the sacrificial animals. Now, Jesus isn't condemning the practice of sacred animal sacrifice here. He says elsewhere that his purpose is not to overturn the law of Moses. No, what makes Jesus really angry is the unscrupulous people who run the Temple livestock market.

They had a sweet little deal going on there. Those livestock merchants had a monopoly on the sale of sacrificial animals. The Law of Moses says a sacrificial beast must be perfect, "without blemish." Some people tried to bring sacrificial animals from their own herds, but the Temple livestock inspectors nearly always rejected them. They found some physical flaw in the animal. "Sorry, this one's not good enough," they would say. "Just go over there, though: my good friend the livestock dealer will sell you one I've already pre-approved."

It was a corrupt system, built on kickbacks and cronyism. The animal inspectors and livestock merchants grew rich, and it was the poor worshipers who had to pay the price.

Much the same was true of the moneychangers. Pilgrims to Jerusalem were expected to make a financial offering, but there was a huge practical problem with that. The coins issued by the government all had pictures of the Roman emperor

on them. That was an idolatrous image, according to the Second Commandment — you shall not make any graven image — and so had no place in the holy precincts of the Temple. “Sorry, you can’t put that coin in the offering plate,” the Temple inspectors would say. But here’s an easy solution. Just go to my friend the moneychanger over there. He’ll take your idolatrous Roman coins and give you the special Temple currency. It has no human images on it, just an image of palm branches.

Well, you can probably guess what was going on there. The currency-exchange commission was pretty steep. And no doubt there were kickbacks for the Temple officials as well. Pity the poor worshipers, who traveled many days — even weeks — on pilgrimage, only to fall victim to sacred price-gouging.

There was a third thing about the Temple-courtyard businesses, though, that likewise filled the Lord with righteous anger. The place where all this trade was going on was the outer courtyard known as the Court of the Gentiles.

There were many Gentile adherents of Judaism in those days. Some of them were quite devout. But unless the men had received the rite of circumcision and become true Jews in every respect, they were not permitted to enter the inner courts of the Temple. They had to worship outside, in the Court of Gentiles. But just imagine what that would have been like! Imagine how hard it would be to get

into a worshipful mood, with all the shouting and clamor of the livestock market — not to mention the aroma of fresh manure — along with the clinking of the moneychangers' coins and their cries to passersby to come and do business with them!

One thing you can clearly see, by reading what the Bible says about Jesus' ministry, is how unfailingly sympathetic he is to outsiders. From the little tax-collector Zacchaeus, to the brash Samaritan woman at the well, to so many others, Jesus reaches out and ministers to any child of God who has an inquiring spirit and a desire to know God better. What does it say to those outsiders if the only part of the Temple that's open to them is a raucous, smelly livestock market?

There have been some over the years who have looked at this story and concluded that Jesus didn't like the idea of money in close proximity to the place of sacred worship, but that wasn't it at all. It was the sheer covetousness built into the Temple enterprises: the greed that led the merchants to fleece the pilgrims, and to practice their trade in a location that happened to be the only place in the Temple compound where Gentile worshipers could say their prayers.

Point Pleasant Beach, where Claire and I recently came from, has become in recent years a mecca for antique-hunters. There are half-dozen or so antique stores

in the small downtown. The largest one was across the street from our church. If you were to venture into any of those shops, you'd often see a display cabinet with a handwritten sign taped to it. The sign said, "Not For Sale." The sign was necessary because everything in the display cabinet *was* for sale: but not the cabinet itself. The antique dealers needed the cabinet to display their wares.

As a customer, as soon as you see that sign, your relationship with the display cabinet changes. It becomes different from your relationship with everything else in the store. You walk up and down, looking the various items over. With each item — at least the ones you like — you do a little mental calculation: "What's the price? Can I afford it? If I haggle, can I get it cheaper?" But the display cabinet's not part of that calculus. The dealer has removed that piece of furniture from the running. The item is, literally, priceless.

There are those who claim that everything in this world has its price. But, don't you know, when you slap a price tag on something, it actually loses some of its intrinsic value. The price tag cheapens it.

There's an old Calvin and Hobbes comic where Hobbes, the stuffed tiger, says to young Calvin: "I don't know what's worse, the fact that everyone's got a price, or the fact that their price is so low."

The "You shall not covet" commandment is meant to fix that. It poses the

question, “Do you really want to live in a world where everything — and everybody — is for sale? For most of us, if we think about it, the answer is “No.”

A perfect antidote to covetousness is the sacrament of which we will soon partake, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Our Lord offers the bread and the cup to us, saying, “Take, eat, this is my body; take, drink, this is the blood of the new covenant.”

The good things laid out upon this table are not for sale. But they are for you — and for me. They are gifts offered to us by a generous Lord.

Take, eat, remember — and live!

Let us pray.

**Lord, it’s second nature to us:
this compulsion to put a price tag on everything,
then to stop at nothing
to possess the object of our desire.
Teach us to value above all else
the things that are not for sale —
that could never be for sale.
Remind us of all the wonders
that come to us, from you,
as free and unmerited gift.
And make us properly grateful — always.
Amen.**