

Sermon: September 6 – Zion & Bethlehem Lutheran Churches

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On a scholarly note, I want to begin with a note about the numbering of the commandments:

There are slight mismatches between the Jewish, Catholic, Lutheran, and Protestant numbers for the commandments. The Book of Exodus does not present the commandments as a bullet-pointed memo.

In the Jewish tradition, the preamble, that God brought His chosen people out of Egypt is considered a commandment rather than an introduction. Later faith traditions combine it with the “...no other gods before me...” commandment and the stuff about graven images.

This creates a few numbering mismatches as you compare lists, art, plaques, and monuments in Jewish, Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran contexts.

So, coveting your neighbor’s wife may be a separate sin from coveting their STUFF, depending on the tradition, and whether a marriage is considered a celebration of the union of families, or just a financial transaction.

When Martin Luther split from the Roman Church, there were a lot of things that he did NOT like about Catholicism, but he DID retain the notion that coveting one’s neighbor’s partner was lust, and coveting their STUFF was ENVY.

The composers of the narrative lectionary that guide our readings have divided the Ten Commandments into three groups over recent weeks. The reading two weeks ago advanced commandments one, two, and three – which address our relationship with God.

Last week we looked at commandments four through eight – or nine, which define our relationship with other people.

Both weeks gave us the scene in the Cecil B DeMille “Ten Commandments” film where God burns each commandment into the living rock of Mount Sinai before a terrified Charlton Heston. This is contrasted the last couple of weeks and this week with the New Testament debate where Jesus takes the ten and – more efficiently than an AI Chat GBT bot- edits the commandments down to TWO: Love the Lord and Love one another.

Now we come to week THREE, where the narrative lectionary editors pull out the 10th. We have talked about God, and we have talked about other people. Now let's talk about...STUFF.

And there is so MUCH stuff in the world now. And more neighbors. And more ways to see what they have. And more ways to find out about the SO MANY things that you COULD have. And there is, quantifiably, more...dang...STUFF.

To think about this, maybe we can look at somebody who has the MOST STUFF. Elon Musk – known as the founder of Tesla and Space X, the purchaser of Twitter. He recently became a trillionaire.

To emphasize how unusual this is, Microsoft Word flags the word “trillionaire” as a spelling error. There has never been one of these ever before.

If you made bricks from \$100 bills, and had a mere one Billion dollars in Benjamin bricks, you could build a serviceable barn with that many bricks.

With a Trillion dollars worth of \$100 bricks, you could build a pyramid as tall as the Statue of Liberty, or one of Elon Musk's Space X rockets.

Elon Musk could spend a million dollars a day, and maybe he DOES, and it would take him over 2700 years to go through it.

Covetousness. Envy. Jealousy. The desire to accumulate. These the things that are driving Musk?

Can I get into that mindset? Not at that level, I don't think. I can only imagine.

With that level of accumulation and gathering, I can ONLY IMAGINE that Elon is chronically unsatisfied and unfulfilled.

To me, this feels like a form of slavery. He is servant to desire, rather than a servant to God or to others.

When one is bonded to this level of covetousness, it creates a false idol that replaces God as the object of our worship. I can only imagine that this idol could drive one to steal, to lie, to murder...to break the commandments that guide our relationship with our neighbor and to God.

What can guide us away from this slavery of covetousness, this chronic servitude to envy?

Surely Elon Musk, of all people, should be grateful for what he has accumulated. That should be on Twitter, or X, every day, how grateful he is for gifts from God, the products of his imagination, and the hard work of all of his...army of slaves.

Does this happiness that Elon Musk is SURELY experiencing – this satisfaction, this peace...does this engender any kind of gratefulness?

Not in any statement, any action, and press release, or any tweet that I have seen from him.

If Elon Musk is not grateful, what hope is there for any of us to be grateful or happy?

Maybe we are approaching gratefulness from the wrong direction.

An essay that I encountered some years ago by Brother David Steindl-Rast – an Austrian Benedictine monk – introduced me to a more effective pathway to happiness, and satisfaction.

His bold thesis is that not all happy people are grateful. But people who start from a foundation of gratefulness are almost inevitably happy.

Yes, daily life is undeniably hard. But through a rough day you can look at the things that you DO have and be grateful.

A home: Yes, the house needs a few repairs and could be a little cleaner, but I have a place to sleep at night.

A good meal...

Friendship and love.

A sunny day...a cool breeze.

The gifts of grace that filter through to us every day. That thorny work problem or prickly neighbor. Seen through the lens of daily gratefulness, they become an opportunity to learn.

Admittedly, gratefulness does not solve every problem and give us happy endings to every situation. But it does point us in a direction of happiness. It helps us to find the wins, the fun, and the happiness.

Being grateful on a daily, hourly, regular basis can help us find the happiness and satisfaction to free us from the slavery of envy and covetousness.

And if we can follow that tenth commandment a little more effortlessly, it improves our ability to embrace those first three commandments to bring us closer to God. And certainly it can help us to follow the mandates from the commandments, and from Jesus, to love our neighbors.

I hope that you can find the gratefulness in your life that can help you toward happiness and satisfaction. If this helps you toward embracing that tenth commandment a little more closely, it will bring you closer to God and your neighbor.

I am grateful to you for your kind attention to my musings here this morning, and your patience as I learn to lead worship on the occasional Sundays.

Amen

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