HOLY COVETING

In the Name of God...

You shall not covet your neighbor’s household; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or his ass, or anything at all that belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20:13)

Well, why not? What harm could it really do for me to envy what my neighbor has—provided I don’t steal it? This, the last of the Ten Commandments, “the Ten Words,” as the Bible calls them, is surely the most intrusive. All the others deal with fairly public actions: idolatry, or crimes such as murder or adultery or stealing or lying in court or elder abuse. But coveting is an internal thing, something we do entirely within ourselves. You can covet regularly and no one else need ever know. So why does it rank a place, even the climactic place among the Ten Words from Sinai, the most comprehensive biblical statement about what it is to live well with God and neighbor—that is, to be fully human? What’s so bad about coveting? We aren’t proud of it, but isn’t envy for most of us a fairly routinized part of our emotional make-up? It seems that at this point God and Moses have—as they used to say about certain preachers—stopped preaching and commenced to meddling.

But this is the season for the church to ask meddling questions. Lent is the most intrusive season of the church year, the time for self-examination, when the Ten Commandments have traditionally been read with regularity, as a measure of what it is to be human and humane. The Tenth Word from Sinai has special import during Lent, for coveting is not about what we do but what we want, and how that is a matter of great consequence in our life with God. The traditional practice of Lenten fasting is meant to make us more conscious of what we want, to help us “order our desires,” as the great spiritual guides of the past have expressed it, and recognize through some discomfort that a craving for chocolate, say, is less elemental than our need for a relationship with God. Lent is about learning to want what we need. Could that be the essence of true humanity, to want just what we need? If so, then wanting more and other than what we need inevitably dehumanizes us; it alienates us, however subtly, from God and neighbor. And the biblical story begins by showing us how that alienation happens.

As the story goes, there was covetousness almost from the get-go, as soon as there were human beings. I don’t know what they told you in Sunday School, but covetousness is the original sin; that is what got the first humans expelled from Eden. You remember; they were told they could eat from any tree in the garden, except that one fruit tree smack in the middle, and that was fine for a while. But then one day a talking snake, a roaming tempter, enticed the woman to look at that forbidden tree in a different way. The narrative gets very specific here: she saw that the fruit of the tree was attractive; it looked good to eat, and what is more, it was (quote) “to be coveted for gaining wisdom” (Gen. 3:6)—that is how the Hebrew reads; it is the same word as in our commandment: hamad, “covet.” So coveting is the genesis of alienation from God—and notice,
it is an *intellectual* act. Coveting is a distinctly human form of wanting. Other animals experience *instinctual* desire—for food, water, a mate, a nest. But when I covet, I am making a reasoned assessment, a value judgment about what I need in order to be more than I currently am. This is the essence of coveting: wanting to be more or better—in this case, wanting to be wise—and thinking something “out there” will supply my lack.

Now God gave us an intellect for a reason. Humans were meant to become wise, presumably through intimate contact with God. As the Genesis story tells it, God liked to take walks with the humans in the garden, when the evening breeze came up. But instead of gradually growing in wisdom through intimacy, they chose the quick and dirty approach; they did the one thing God had told them not to do, and the rest is history.

Coveting, then, has a special place in the Bible, as the first sin in Eden and the last of the Ten great Words from God on Sinai. Coveting gets special attention, because it is so fundamental to the way we humans are in the world. It comes to us easily, naturally, and as the Eden story suggests, it has the potential for distorting our lives, even ruining them. And that points to the theological problem with our propensity for coveting: Are we humans hard-wired for sin, bound to damage ourselves by rampant coveting, the most natural of all sins? Did God set us up for spiritual failure? No, because there is in fact one good kind of coveting that works in our favor; sort of like good cholesterol, it actually contributes to our spiritual health. That is, as the great spiritual teacher who wrote Psalm 19 tell us, the desire for God’s truth; God’s will made known to us is infinitely more precious than gold, a lot of gold (19:11). Wanting God’s truth, watching for it, even craving it—that is what makes us fully human. This is the kind of holy coveting that Martin How’s lovely choral anthem lays out for us, as we have just heard:

Oh, dear Lord, of thee three things I pray:

to see thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
follow thee more nearly, day by day.

(Some of you will remember those lines from Godspell. That’s a thirteenth-century prayer that, however improbably, made its way to Broadway in the twentieth century. Go figure.)

Coveting the close presence of God day by day by day—such wholesome coveting gradually restores to us the joy of Eden, the garden whose Hebrew name *eden* means “Delight.” Every other kind of coveting is forbidden. This is the logic of the Word from Sinai: Do not covet what your neighbor has, because that kind of wanting sucks the life out of community and the joy out of your own life. Inevitably, incrementally, bad coveting isolates and impoverishes us; it deprives us of real relationships with both God and neighbor. Let’s see how that works.

First of all, bad coveting alienates me from my neighbor. I look at someone, and what she has reminds me of what I lack. Or perhaps I see her achievement, some honor that has come to her but not to me, and that makes me feel less worthy of love and respect. Of course, in all this I am not really seeing my neighbor at all; I am just gazing at a distorted image of myself. My neighbor is my competitor, even if she has no idea that I envy her. My heart is distant from her; I have no desire for genuine relationship, to laugh when she laughs and weep when she mourns. I might even wish—this is a secret I keep from myself most of the time—I might wish that things would not go quite so well for her as they seem to do. No, I don’t actively plot to do her harm; but
would it be so bad if she had to deal with a little of the disappointment I live with? If you have ever felt that way, in the secret corner of your heart, then you can understand that the prohibition on bad coveting corresponds to another core commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). How can I love my neighbor, if I am focused on what she has and I want, so badly want?

Bad coveting distances me from my neighbor, and it also distances me from God, because it deprives me of gratitude, joy in the life that God has given me. Being fully human means crafting a life from the particular set of gifts, and limitations, and difficulties that is uniquely mine. Sometimes, when I run up hard against my own limitations and difficulties and vent my frustration, my husband gently says to me, “I’m sorry that you’re human.” To use an image from the Apostle Paul, being fully human means crafting the rough clay of our lives (2 Cor. 4:7) into something that reveals just a little of the glory of God; it has beauty, even as it remains fragile, like a clay pot. And I can show forth the beauty of God only if I pay attention to what I have to work with, not on what is missing. If I look at my life and see only reasons for shame or resentment or envy, then I am (strange to say) depriving God of the one thing God craves. To speak in crude terms, giving genuine thanks is the only way my imperfect life can add value to God’s life, which is itself Perfection.

If bad coveting deprives God of my gratitude, then at the same time it deprives me of hope. The more absorbed I am in what I lack and someone else seems to have in abundance, the less I can see that God is able to meet my real needs. And if that is not the case, then I am without hope in this world. Covetousness, then, is the opposite of loving my neighbor, and equally, the opposite of hoping in God. In short, covetousness, envy, is the total opposite of the Christian life.

But let’s tell the truth: gratitude and hope are often hard to come by. My life is pock-marked, to say the least. There are scars and open wounds that don’t look like the raw material for a whole life. There are deficits for which I am not grateful, losses to which I am not reconciled and may never be—and I am not just speaking of my personal life, but also of our common life, in this country and around the globe. We are afraid to read the daily news. How can we then in sincerity “lift up [our] heart” and “offer thanks and praise” to God, in the words of the Eucharistic liturgy? How can we claim genuine hope for the future, for those we love, for our groaning, grieving, justly aggrieved nation and world?

There is a Christian answer to that, but it is not an easy one. The answer lies in what we call walking the way of the cross, the discipline Christians practice with special intention during Lent. Walking the way of the cross means paying attention to the behaviors and desires and thoughts that alienate us from God and neighbor. Lent is the season for getting real, when we work to rid ourselves of false perceptions and deluded images of ourselves—not just as individuals but as a body. This is the season to be honest about the church itself, as it confronts the body politic and is immersed in the body politic, for good and for ill. If we examine and confess the truth about ourselves, then and only then can the light of Christ disperse the darkness and confusion in our hearts and in the church. Only a church on its way to the cross can show forth some of Christ’s light in the world.
Overcoming alienation, getting rid of delusions, seeing and telling the truth about ourselves—this is hard, steady work. So we need Lent, this season for keeping it simple and getting real, for living more deliberately in prayer. Just because it is simple, this prayer of holy coveting is better than most:

Oh, dear Lord, of thee three things I pray:

to see thee more clearly,

love thee more dearly,

follow thee more nearly, day by day.

Let all God’s people say, *Amen.*

Ellen F. Davis