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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

November 18, 2012

Matthew 6:19-34; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

So Blessed!

(Tenth in series, The Ten Commandments: More Than They May Seem)

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slaves, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. –Exodus 20:17–

The tenth Commandment concludes the list with a different sort of emphasis from the other nine. The tenth Commandment is a prohibition against a wrong thought or feeling rather than a wrong action. It is a sort of book end to the first Commandment, *You shall have no other gods before me*. The first Commandment concerns right belief, the tenth Commandment concerns right desire. The right faith and desire identified in the first and last Commandments will lead to the right actions required by the other eight.

We can understand the trouble caused for us from our desire for things that are not good for us. Some things may never be right for us, or as the poet of Ecclesiastes expressed, it is not the right time for them. Sometimes we might break the tenth Commandment by wanting what we want when we want it, which is now. Patience is the virtue of timeliness. *To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.*

It may be important to take note that not all desire is condemned in the Commandment, but rather certain specified desires; in particular, desire for things that already belong to someone else. There is a distinction here between the monotheistic religions and Buddhist thought which emphasizes the way to happiness as a negation of desire in general. The Second and third Noble Truths of Buddhism state that “suffering is caused by desire, and suffering can be overcome by the cessation of desire.” (Smith)

We might understand the Buddhist negation of desire. If we desire nothing we will experience no frustration, no impatience, no jealousy or envy. There will be no conflict over perceived limitations of resources. I am not an expert on Buddhism and I do not want to misrepresent it. But I think I may be on solid ground to suggest that the perspective of the tenth Commandment on the matter of desire is a less ascetic one than the Buddhist point of view. The tenth Commandment does not call for the cessation of all desire but only of some. The tenth Commandment is specifically against desire for what properly belongs to others. Desire for what others have might be called wrong desire. The cessation of wrong desire would be achieved through the development of right desire for the values of God.

Jesus validated his appetites. It was his cousin, John the Baptist, who was in the wilderness denying himself the creaturely comforts, “clothed in camel’s hair and eating locusts and wild honey”. (Matthew 3:4) Of the contrast between him and John, Jesus said, *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. (Matthew 11:18,19)*

When it comes to this difference between Jesus and John the Baptist I take the side of Jesus. I do not want to give up all desire. Desire is the motivation of life. Desire for food, success, beauty, faith, romance, hearth and home have often led me to wonderful experiences. It was when my desires ran counter to the will of God, or when I lost control of them, or could not postpone their gratification until an appropriate time, that I came to trouble. *For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.*

Walter Brueggemann interprets the tenth Commandment as a prohibition against desire of “what is not properly one’s own”. (Brueggemann) The explanatory comments following the Commandment tell us that our neighbors house and household, goods and kindred, are not properly ours. Almost everyone might agree with that. But what of other things? What else is not properly ours and what is?

In one of the episodes of the original Star Trek television series, the ship encounters an alien culture which has psychokinetic powers. Previously, this same alien culture rescued a small human boy who lost his parents. The boy grew up in the alien culture and learned the secrets of psycho kinesis, which is the ability to manipulate the physical world simply with the mind. When he is a teenager he meets the humans on the Star Ship Enterprise. Captain Kirk tells the aliens that since the boy is human he belongs with other people. The aliens agree to let captain Kirk and the crew of the Enterprise attempt to assimilate the boy back into human culture. The boy has a difficult time. In addition to all the normal teenage issues he must learn how to control his psychokinetic power and not to selfishly abuse it. At one point, in exasperation with the boy, Captain Kirk snaps at him, “Look, there are a million things you can have in life and a million things you can not have. You may not like it very much, but that is the way it is.” Ultimately the boy could not adapt to human culture because he could not resist using his special power for selfish reasons which sometimes hurt others. To his great sadness and that of the entire Star Ship crew, he had to return to live in the alien culture for his and everyone else’s safety. He was not able to learn what was properly his and what was not.

Consider the following real and present day example. The CEO of a large company lays off many workers which saves the company a lot of money to the benefit and appreciation of the stock holders. In addition to the difficulty it brings to the those who lost their jobs, the remaining employees must work at a exhausting stressful pace in order to make up for the reduction in the workforce. It is all perfectly legal. In recognition of the CEO’s efforts he is given a twenty million dollar year end bonus. Now, what do you think? Is that money properly his? If the bonus was only one million instead of twenty, and the other nineteen million put back into labor, it could have restored a lot of

jobs and a healthier working environment. Is a one million dollar bonus enough? Is anything that is legally ours also always properly ours? Is making oneself even wealthier by eliminating another person's job a way of desiring what another person has?

St. Paul framed the issue like this in his first letter to Timothy.

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. (1 Timothy 6:6-10)

The truth is that we have been so very blessed! How many of us here today do not have all that we need that is good for us and even many of our wants? The hand of God is a generous hand. We need fear no shortage of that which brings us life. Jesus promised that if we seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness then everything else will be given to us as well. A more cautionary tone might put it like this. Be careful about what you seek, it may be all you get.

Smith, Sophie S. "The Truth of the End of Suffering in Buddhism". *Helium.com*. Web. 20 Feb. 2011.

Brueggemann, Walter. (Contributor) "The New Interpreter's Bible". Vol.1. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.