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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/15/2009, The Third Sunday in Lent
Exodus 20:1-17, John 2:13-22
The Desires of the Heart

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon on the desires of the heart. My text is from our First Lesson. As Luther counts the commandments, we are speaking of the Ninth and Ten Commandments -- the coveting commandments:

¹⁷“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”(Exodus 20:17, RSV)

When Jesus calls a man, he calls him completely, lock, stock, and barrel. When Jesus calls a woman, he calls her whole. The love of Jesus for us is so passionate, that he cannot rest content to have simply our bodies. He wants also our hearts.

Perhaps that is the simplest way, for example, to explain Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of our Lord. He simply did not get it. He gave Jesus his body, but not his heart, and in the end such a bargain let Judas down. By the end of his story, we read how unchanged his heart is in spite of having walked with Jesus. And so, we have his dreadful negotiation over the very life of his Master:

¹⁴Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests,
¹⁵And said unto them, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him.(Matthew 26:14-16, KJV)

We do not know the circumstances of the call of Judas, only that he was one of the Twelve. So, let’s imagine him to be a fisherman, like Peter and Andrew, James and John. Jesus, then, comes along and calls him, “Judas, come, follow me, and I will make you a fisher, no longer of fish, but of men and women, boys and girls.” So, we imagine Judas leaving his fishing nets and boats and crew, and following on behind Jesus. Fair enough. Good for the man. He has started in the right direction.

Only, when Christ calls a man, he calls not only his body, but also his heart. He calls us entire. He calls us to see new things, to think new thoughts, to value things anew. That is, Jesus seeks a transformation of our perceptive, cognitive, and emotional lives.

The saint, for example, seems *to see* things differently from many of us. Our eyes might slide right on over the poor man or the sad woman or the quiet deeds of kindness that help adorn a sometimes hard city, but the saint has practiced and trained himself, trained herself, to see such things. Our eyes might be drawn to bright lights and tasteful clothing, but the eye of the saint seems to slide right on by such natural attractions and to linger on the leper or the one lost in grief. And so, the saint has given Christ not

only his body, but also his seeing. He has practiced Christ's perception, she has disciplined himself to see with the eyes of Christ's compassion. He or she simply sees things that the rest of us might see one day, but not till we start to give even our hearts to the Lord.

Again, when Jesus calls a man, calls a woman, he calls for a new creation. He asks nothing less from us than a transformation of our human yearnings, so that God becomes our highest desire.

That is what the Ninth and the Tenth Commandments are all about. They ask us to get the desires of our hearts under control. It is an unmodern way of speaking, I know. We are immersed in a world clever at creating desires in our hearts. Especially you young ones: your hearts are under a continual onslaught of crafting and manipulation. You suffer wave upon wave of forces seeking to implant desires in your hearts, leaving your restless for more and more things. It is a wonder you are so beautiful as you certainly are. The times are not so innocent in this respect. There is research, marketing, feedback, subliminal messages, bright lights and sounds, and the power of popular culture in television, movies, and internet -- all preaching to you about what is good and true and lovely in a human life. You hardly have a chance to learn these things from your parents or from the Bible. Everywhere you look, someone is trying to implant another desire in your heart, for if they have a desire in your heart, they might soon have entry to your wallet or to your vote. But the coveting commandments confront all this seduction of your hearts, and try to teach you to love God first of all. Love God with all your heart, then your other desires will become more peaceful and ordered and human.

Have you noticed, then, that the Ten Commandments begin with the call to love God and end that way too? A lawyer once asked Jesus about the greatest commandment, and Jesus answered by speaking of love:

³⁷Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. ³⁸This is the first and great commandment. ³⁹And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (Matthew 22:37-39, KJV)

And so it is that the "first and great commandment" is that we are love God. And then the Ninth and Ten Commandments pin this down by asking that we *do not love* our neighbor's house, nor spouse overmuch. Do not love them above God, for only God is worthy of you truest love.

There is a little rhyme to that way of putting the coveting commandments: house and spouse. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's *house*. That is, do not want the material possessions of others *overmuch*. Do not let your desire for material things be too strong, inordinate, all out of proportion to their real worth.

And do not covet thy neighbor's *spouse*. That is, do not let your desires be *improper*. Do not desire that which you should not have, including your neighbor's spouse. Let your neighbors be. Let them have peace. Be a blessing in their life, not a threat.

So, let's take the coveting commandments in turn. I begin with a brief discussion of the Ninth Commandment: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house.

Financial advisors counsel us to distinguish our *needs* from our *desires*, and to focus on funding our needs first, before our desires. And surely, that is sound practical advice. The problem is that *we* are the ones doing the distinguishing, and we have been schooled in coveting. We are not yet as good as our Maker desires us to be. The human heart is tempted to fudge the difference between needs and desires, with the result that our list of needs ends up including things like new computer games or the latest fashions. And it is no wonder. It is as I was saying earlier: we live in a world that is very clever at convincing us that we just *have to have* such things. Indeed, sometimes it seems that we almost quiver with desire for material things. We sit there and vibrate, like hummingbirds. We are restless. We desire *things* too much.

Well, the goal of Christian piety and spiritual practices is to wean us away from the lure of material things. The traditional Lenten discipline of fasting, for example, is designed to break the hold that food and drink have over us. Fasting amounts to rebellion against the appetites we have too long nourished. Fasting gives us a chance to try to get some of the desires of our hearts under control.

Likewise with almsgiving: it is a spiritual practice designed to re-craft our hearts, so that we come to desire our own welfare less and to value the welfare of others more.

And above all, drawing closer to Jesus, immersing ourselves in his story, noticing what he cared about and what mattered to him -- such spiritual practices can help break the hold that coveting has on us.

That's what the Ninth Commandment does: it appeals to us to love God even more than the lovely things of this world.

And now, let's turn to the Tenth Commandment. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's spouse.

To do this, let me refer to a movie Carol and I recently rented: *The Dancer Upstairs* (2002). It starred Javier Bardem, a wonderful Spanish actor who is now famous for his role as the relentless killer in the movie *No Country for Old Men*. In *The Dancer Upstairs*, Bardem plays a talented, upright, and hardworking police detective named Agustin Rejas. He is trying to find and arrest a violent revolutionary in some South American country, probably Peru.

Along the way of his long search for the revolutionary, Agustin falls in love with his daughter's dance teacher. This is all out of proportion. It is not right, for Agustin is married and he is a father and he ought not to love this young woman.

Yet the heart is strange and wild, now isn't it? He makes no conscious decision to love this young woman, and he loves and honors his wife and daughter. It is just that one day he looks up and finds that he loves the dance teacher too.

I will not tell you the interesting flow of the movie, the twists and turns, because you might want to see the movie yourself. But I will tell you the great concluding line of the movie. A representative of the government, baffled by Agustin's decisions, says to him, "She is only a young woman. She is 78% water. And you could have been President!" But Agustin does not grieve about this. He does not regret what he has done, for he has followed his heart.

The thing is, the government official is right. He is right in this important sense: The young woman is not God! And Agustin will never love the woman right till he loves God first of all. And in the end, I guess no one will be safe, neither the young woman, nor his wife, nor his daughter, until he first of all loves God above all else.

“Thou shall not covet thy neighbor’s spouse.” This commandment asks us to love the One and the only One who is really adequate to our heart, and that is the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then we can love others too.

Do not desire your neighbor’s spouse. Go to counseling if you must. Seek the help of friends. Pray. Meditate on Jesus. Try to see the world with the eyes of Christ’s compassion. Seek to train your heart to desire God first of all.

I chose the *King James Version* of this morning’s Gospel story simply for the energetic way that translation puts the devotion of Jesus to his heavenly Father:

¹⁷And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house *hath eaten me up*.(John 2:17, KJV)

Indeed, it hath eaten him up! His love for the God of Israel was so whole-hearted that it meant more than life itself to him. And because it meant more than life itself, he loved God truly and thereby loved us completely, to the gaining of our lives, even at the cost of his, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.