

Scripture: Exodus 20:4-5a; John 1:1-5,14-16

Sermon Title: "More than Meets the Eye"

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Today we are continuing our journey through the Ten Commandments – these ancient laws given to the Israelites as we consider the second commandment “you shall not make for yourself an idol”. And as we do this we will be considering again the question of what does this law mean for the modern day Christian – the modern day Christ follower?

Last week, when we looked at the First Commandment about having no other gods before the Lord, we talked about how there are concepts, there are motives which can become like gods in our lives – greed, earthly power, status and so on. This second command focuses more on things – human made items that we may endow with such a place of power in our lives. Now, the command seems to refer to things that are explicitly crafted to become an idol. But, I want to talk today not about the things that are designed to be like gods but rather about the things which have the power to point us to God, to enhance our worship or our prayer life.

Let me share with you a small example from my personal prayer life of something which helps me connect with God from time-to-time. In my nightstand by my bed, I keep this – it is an Anglican rosary, gifted to me by an Episcopalian friend from seminary. And every now and again, I will reach over to my nightstand and take this out, holding it, meditating on the cross it bears, maybe thumbing the beads and reciting the Lord’s prayer on the large beads, repeating a scripture or a phrase on the small beads, and allowing this to help me pray, help me focus on God, particularly in challenging times – those moments when sometimes I don’t know what to pray or even how to pray. I would venture to guess that we all have in some way items like this – if not personally certainly as a collective. Some will see the cross here as an item which connects us to God, or other items in this space, for some it is this space in it’s entirety –

this building, or this plot of ground which has housed a worshipping congregation since 1773 and holds so much history, for some simply being here helps us center our hearts, our minds on God. For others, there may be things and spaces outside these walls which helps them feel that connection to the Divine.

And these can certainly be good things – they can help to unite us with our God. They can help us to experience something that is beyond words, beyond human imagination, beyond the craft of our human hands. We heard today also from the Gospel of John – a passage that may not immediately seem like it makes sense with our second commend, but let me share why I paired these two together. This passage from John is so poetic as the author tries to find words that can capture God, as they try to explain the unexplainable – it reminds us that there is so much more to God than could ever meet the eye – than could ever be captured in anything of this world. Above all, it reminds us of this grace upon grace which comes from our God, witnessed through Jesus Christ. Now, if there are things or places which help us get a glimpse of that grace, help us to feel that grace, call us back to the claim on our lives as God’s beloved, this is indeed good. But if something in our lives is ever given too much power, and if that thing begins to cause us to lose sight of grace, lose sight of love, it no longer points us to God. It has become a god. It has become an idol.

Earlier this week, a news story broke about what I would certainly consider to be an act of idolatry in a church in the DC area. I read about this in the Washington Post online as well as watched a local news story from the area about the events which unfolded. Here’s what happened. As mourners gathered in the church to remember, celebrate, and commend to God the life of Agnes Hicks, they were greeting one another and comforting one another before the service began. In these moments, as someone went to hug a fellow mourner, an act of care, compassion, an act of love, they accidentally knocked over a cup. This cup described by the Reverend as a “sacred chalice” was damaged from the tumble. At this point, everything escalated. The Pastor, according to Hick’s daughter “literally got on the mic and said, ‘There will be no funeral, no Mass,

no repast, everyone get out of my church." "Everyone get out of my church." And note that I had to clean up that last part a little bit – you can see what he said with a quick google search when you get home. Police were called, mourners left the church with the casket holding their loved one. All of this, because of a "sacred chalice". All of this because of a cup.

Now, I do want to note that apologies were later offered and as a people of grace, acknowledging that we all have our brokenness, we should look toward forgiveness and seek love in the path forward however that feels right and good. But how does a cup, which for years likely helped people in that church connect in some degree to the grace of God, how does it come to the point where it blinds us from that grace? I don't have an answer to that question – but somewhere along the line, that cup was given too much power and it would seem became an idol in the eyes of the pastor. And it led to this horrific scene which was, as far as I'm concerned, void of any showing of grace and love.

Beloved people of God, may we never give something that much power. Whether it be something designed for worship or prayer, like a rosary or a chalice, or anything else of this world for that matter. If a thing or a place crafted by human hands ever becomes more important than grace, more important than love, it has become an idol. For it no longer points us toward God but away from God. It no longer helps us to experience the gifts of God which are beyond words, beyond the capacity of anything, but it begins to destroy. That's when we know we need to let it go – that's when we need to remove the power that we have granted it in our lives. Because our God is greater than what can be crafted by human hands. And grace and love, these beautiful gifts from God, will always be more important than anything ever could be. So may we allow the things, the places in our lives which help us connect to God, feel that grace and love, may we continue to allow them to do just that. Yet, if we ever find that we cannot let them go, if things of this world begin to rule our lives in any way and lead us away from paths of love and grace, their power must be removed. So may we hold onto the

things which help us experience the gifts of God, because that can be beautiful, but may we never hold them too tight so that we can let them go if they ever hide the boundless love and unending grace of God from our lives or the lives of those around us. So be it and may it be so. Amen.