

Tracy Daub
10/8/17--University Presbyterian Church
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-21

A SECOND COMMANDMENT CRISIS

It only took 12 short chapters for things to fall apart. We read today the 10 Commandments from chapter 20 of Exodus. These famous commandments given by God through God's messenger Moses were given to the Hebrew people out there in the wilderness after they had escaped from brutal slavery in Egypt. These 10 Commandments were regarded as a precious gift from God, a gift that would help them order their lives in ways that honored God and respected their earthly relationships with one another. We today tend to think of commandments as restrictions on our freedoms. But the Hebrew people, coming from their situation of slavery, a situation of social chaos and injustice, the Hebrew people understood that these commandments offered freedom from distorted relationships, and were a pathway to peace. Peaceful relationships would be a natural by-product of faithful relationships that honored others and above all honored God.

Nevertheless, only 12 chapters after having received this precious gift, only 12 chapters later, the people completely violate the second commandment--"you shall not make for yourself an idol." Moses has been gone for awhile, off conversing with God, and the people get anxious and feel abandoned, and so they take matters into their own hands and craft a golden idol of a calf. And they begin to worship the golden calf. In almost no time flat after having received these precious commandments that will guide them into right living, in no time flat, they have distorted their primary relationship in life: their relationship with God.

The human condition has really not changed much all these thousands of years later. Have you noticed how in one moment we can profess our devotion to God--but in no time flat,

we can turn around and offer our loyalty to other gods? Like the Hebrew people, when we get anxious or fearful, when we are looking to feel more secure in life, we too can craft idols that receive our worship and devotion. I think some of this stems from a need to feel more in control. We want to trust something that we can see, feel, touch. That's why the Hebrew people made for themselves a golden calf. They could see it, feel it, touch it. And so we fashion idols that can do this for us.

To be sure, some of these idols are not bad things. The problem occurs when we distort our relationship with them, offering them blind or excessive devotion, elevating their importance beyond their proper place and rightful role. Almost anything can become our idol.

Take our love for our family. Family is a gift from God, for sure. But it can become distorted in our lives. There is a tendency in our society to elevate and adore the family. Think about that saying: family comes first. At first we think this sounds like a very noble sentiment. But when we think about it, when we deconstruct the thinking behind this sentiment, we will discover that it is antithetical to the Christian faith. First of all, family doesn't come first--God comes first. Families are places where we live out God's love, God's steadfast commitment, where we live out God's patience and grace. But offering our families blind devotion is a distortion of our relationship with God. Families are flawed and imperfect human organizations and are prone to embody human failings and weaknesses. Our ultimate devotion is not to them but to God and the way of God.

Moreover, Jesus completely redefined the whole idea of family, expanding the boundaries of family beyond just blood relatives. To be a Christian means that everyone is to be considered our family. To say "family comes first" is to commit ourselves to a structure where there are insiders and outsiders--a system where some receive our care while others do not. This

way of thinking is contrary to Jesus' gospel. When we offer this excessive, blind devotion to family, we have fashioned for ourselves an idol.

The same is true when people place unquestioning devotion in national pride. When we turn the flag or the national anthem or the pledge of allegiance into some kind of purity test of a person's patriotism, we are beginning to craft an idol of our nation. Sentiments like "My country, right or wrong," or "my country, love it or leave it," puts the nation above reproach or correction. And when elevated to such a position, we have distorted what should be a meaningful healthy, relationship between a people and their country.

Even the Bible can become an idol. Of course, we honor the Bible as God's word. We turn to it to hear God's life-giving, saving message for our lives. But rather than regarding the Bible as a vehicle for knowing God and learning God's way, people sometimes confuse the Bible *with* God. Instead of building a relationship with God, they revere the Bible and become entrenched in a rigid relationship with the Bible.

I think we are especially prone to violate the second commandment, the one prohibiting us from making and worshipping idols, because we seek security in things we can see, and feel, and touch. And so we come to trust these things rather than the God of life, the God of creation, the God of redeeming love who sometimes seems to us a little harder to see and feel and trust.

I wonder, I wonder if we in our modern society may have created yet another idol for ourselves. I wonder if perhaps our society's devotion to guns without any restrictions has become a new kind of idol for us. Could it be that our society's blind, unquestioning devotion to the Second Amendment has directly challenged the Second Commandment?

Of course, the recent mass shooting in Las Vegas has raised yet again the conversation around guns. And how could it reasonably not? So many people killed by one individual possessing extraordinary fire power. How could it not?

And yet, our federal government has prohibited the Centers For Disease Control from even studying gun violence as a public health problem. Gun violence research came to a halt in 1996 when Congress threatened to strip funding from the CDC unless it stopped research into firearm injuries and deaths. The ban rippled down throughout other agencies, drying up money for almost all public health studies on the issue. As a result, no one really knows what would prevent another Las Vegas shooting from taking place because there is no good data for 21 years on what works and what doesn't work in preventing gun violence. Do background checks really work? No one knows. What are the best ways to stop a lone gunman from carrying out an act like in Las Vegas? No one knows. It is impossible to have a meaningful conversation about preventing gun violence when we can't even study the issue as a public health problem.

The censorship surrounding even the *study* of gun violence is a sign of our society's distorted relationship with guns. The important place of the Second Amendment giving people the right to bear arms need not be threatened by efforts to study the problem or by reasonable laws aimed at public safety. Every Constitutional right has parameters. The right to free speech is held in check by various laws limiting the scope of free speech. I can't yell "fire" in a crowd just for the fun of watching people panic. I cannot defame someone. The right to freedom of religion is governed by parameters: I cannot practice a religion that engages in human sacrifice. The Second Amendment can also stand strong even if some reasonable parameters are placed upon it for public safety. No one would accuse a person of being "anti-car" just because that person supported laws that governed safe driving practices, and laws about who could drive a

car, and at what age. The Second Amendment is not in jeopardy by enacting reasonable laws around guns. What clearly is in jeopardy by not making any changes to our laws surrounding guns and the study of gun violence, what is in jeopardy are you and me and all our loved ones.

Now, there are some who may be saying to themselves, "Tracy, stay out of politics and stick to God." But I challenge you to tell me: what part of our lives is God not present? Everything in our lives is a God issue--especially when people are suffering from a great wrong. Men, women, and children in our country are suffering over and over again because of gun violence. Gun violence such as we saw this week is a faith issue and a moral issue. And what is wrong, what is wrong is that we keep having these horrible shootings, these massacres, and that we do nothing about it.

We have had so many of these mass shootings that we have adopted a type of civic ritual of grieving. After these shootings, you will find these same rituals. Flags will be flown at half staff. There will be moments of silence. We will read stories about the people who were killed and hear interviews with those who were injured. Certain heroic figures will be celebrated. And then there will be prayer vigils and candle light vigils. Now, I am certainly in favor of prayer, especially in such times of terrible grief and pain and fear. But at some point, at some point, we must wonder if such prayers in response to yet another shooting are disingenuous. Think about it this way: if I passed by a hungry person on the street and I said to them, "I will pray for you," but I did nothing to alleviate their hunger, then my prayer is disingenuous. It is an empty prayer. What about our prayers in the aftermath of gun violence? If in our pain and outrage we do nothing to prevent another such act of violence, if we just keep letting these shootings happen over and over again, our prayers are disingenuous. Empty rituals.

Instead, moved by grief, let us transform our pain into action. Let us love God and our neighbor by seeking to end the violence. Let us find ways out of this morass of pain and death beyond just shaking our heads and holding another prayer vigil.

God gave us the 10 Commandments as a gift. This includes the Second Commandment: "You shall not make for yourself an idol." Blind devotion to anything we create for ourselves only leads to distortion. God offers us a gift to free us from distortion so that we may find our ultimate security, hope, and meaning.