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“Living Large”

Exodus 20:4-6

Brett Younger
Senior Minister

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You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Exodus 20:4-6

A six-year-old suggests: “Think of the biggest number you can. Now add five. Then imagine if you had that many donuts. Wow! That’s five more than the biggest number you could come up with!”

Imagining more than we can imagine is hard for us to imagine, but we have to try. The Hebrew people tried to imagine God, but their ideas fell short. God is strong like a bull, and so they fashioned a statue of a bull to remind them of God. God sees everything like an eagle, and so they made an eagle to help them remember God. The artists were trying to make the invisible God more visible, but, unfortunately, the idols kept them from imagining more than they could imagine.

The prophet Isaiah tells the sarcastic story of an idol maker who cuts down a tree, uses some of the wood for a fire, the rest of the wood for an idol, and then worships the idol without recognizing his own foolishness. What begins as a picture of God becomes God to the one who made it. Thinking that we know something of what God is like leads us to believe that we know exactly what God is like. The

unfathomable God does not seem unfathomable anymore.

As the people of Israel listen, they think they hear the voice of God bigger than the God they had imagined say: “No carved gods of any size, shape, or form of anything whatsoever. Don’t bow down to them and don’t serve them because I am God.”

Worshipping an inferior image of God is so serious that it becomes a curse on whole families. We have seen children whose lives are ruined by their parents’ dysfunctional understanding of God. If we teach our children that God is as narrow-minded as we are, they may have lonely lives. If we teach them to be afraid of God, they may have boring lives.

At the same time, worshipping the God bigger than we imagine is a blessing to the whole community. The voice tells the Israelites to worship God as God is, mysterious and invisible, and not merely as they can envision God. They should reject any ideas that limit God.

The second commandment cannot be dismissed as idle speculation, idle talk, or idle chatter, just because it is difficult. This commandment is one of five that have commentary attached to it. That means the Israelites find this one particularly hard.

Some scholars argue that the Ten Commandments were originally ten words. The longer statements surrounding a commandment are evidence that Israel tried to ignore that commandment. Their teachers expanded the commandment to close the loopholes.

They had to defend the idea that no image human beings made could ever come close to the wonder of God. We cannot draw, shape, or chisel anything that is adequate.

Any description of God describes God as less than God is.

The Hebrew word for idol is the root word for shadow. We are not to picture God's shadows, because that is too small a view of God. Painting God would be like playing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony with a referee's whistle.

At first glance, you and I might think we are off the hook on this second commandment. Most of us have not made any graven images lately, but we are surrounded by gods that are too small. Religious people often have small gods. Like the six blind people of India who upon meeting an elephant decide that an elephant is a rope, tree trunk, wall, snake, spear, or leaf. Many grab on to one idea about God and decide they have a handle on all truth about God.

God is a divine grandmother who says, "You are perfect just the way you are." Or God is a tight-fisted judge ready to pound the gavel. Or God is an inventor who put it together and then lost interest.

Idolatry decides one thing about God is everything there is to know about God. From the far left to the far right, religious people think they have God in their hip pocket, because they take one attribute of God and see that as God's only attribute. A small God leads to a small view of God's love. A small God communicates to a small number of people in small, clearly designated ways.

People with small gods act as if God can be contained in a single church or a single approach to faith. Only a small god could be contained in any book—even the Bible. Bibliolatry is mistaking the sign that says "New York, 20 miles" for the city itself.

In our country, the most worshipped small god is materialism, believing that if we have the right stuff—right apartment, right clothes, right toys, then we will be happy.

This idolatry is so much a part of our environment that we do not even notice it any more, like a fish fails to notice the water. People with a small god try to fill the void with all kinds of things—food, health, knowledge, money, careers, alcohol, family—all of which are too small to be God. Everyone has a too small picture of God in their head. Most of us tend to think of God as a collection of our own best qualities.

A king announces that he wants a statue of God. He describes exactly what he wants to the royal sculptors. And you know what is going to happen. When it is done, the statue looks like the king. The king sees what we are reluctant to admit—that we create God in our own image.

When we limit God to our understanding of God, we forget that God is beyond our understanding. Believing in a God we can completely understand leads to an impoverished life. If we have a false idea of God, then the more religious we are the worse it is for us. (William Temple)

Anne Lamott points out, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

The smaller your god, the smaller your life. People who believe in a small god end up too frightened to sing the songs they were born to sing. If we do not believe in a God who is big enough to believe in us, then we stop believing in the gifts God has given us. The secret of the mystery is that God is always bigger. No matter how great we think God is, God is always greater. If we think of God in exactly the way we did five years ago, then we have an idol. If we define God, then we limit God.

Pascal said, “Every religion which doesn’t affirm that

God is hidden isn't true."

God should be a room that keeps getting bigger. Every so often, the walls explode and we find ourselves in a larger more beautiful room than the one before. God keeps expanding our understanding of God and destroying our idols. Our understanding of God is too small and just a shadow of God. The challenge of the second commandment is not just to recognize that God is greater than we have recognized, but to see that God is greater than we can imagine. We need to believe in the incomprehensibility of God. (Honore de Balzac) Our best thoughts and best words about God are metaphors that fall short.

Barbara Brown Taylor talks about the God beyond our words: "When we run out of words, then and perhaps only then can God be God. When we've eaten our own words until we're sick of them, when nothing we can tell ourselves makes a dent in our hunger, when we're prepared to surrender the very Word that brought us into being in hopes of hearing it spoken again—then, at last, we're ready to worship God."

God is beyond our words about God. Hindus believe that you can call God by any name because there is no name that is not God's name. God created all sounds, so any sound names God, addresses God, and is God's name. The rustling of leaves, the roar of the ocean, and the singing of birds are, like all other sounds, faint echoes of God's glory.

Belief in a God who is bigger than we imagine makes life bigger than we imagine. We escape narrow, limited views. Sometimes people with a small god talk about

“God’s plan,” as if God is limited to a particular script. If God can be said to have a plan at all, it is more like street theater or improvisational comedy than like the puppet shows those with small imaginations picture.

If we believe that God is larger than we can envision, we will live larger. We will find our way through a narrow world where hopefulness is threatened by the acid of pessimism. Following this commandment, recognizing the greatness of God, breathing God’s Spirit leads to meaning, purpose, and curiosity. The church is made up of those who are eternally fascinated with the Eternal. If the Infinite God is with us, the least we can do is be entertaining. The second commandment invites us to live large.

This frequently cited quote is from Williamson’s *Return to Love*: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us. It’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

The children of God live with fuller trust, deeper love, greater passion.

Robertson Davies’ 1947 play *Overlaid* tells the story of Pop—a 70-year-old farmer in a remote area of rural Canada. Pop shares his little farmhouse with his daughter Ethel, her husband, and child. We first see Pop on a Saturday

afternoon as he sits in his kitchen in an ancient, battered top hat and white cotton gloves reveling in the radio broadcast of the New York Metropolitan Opera. An insurance agent shows up at his door with a \$1200 check for a paid-up policy. Pop decides to blow it all on a trip to the Met, complete with fine wine, food, and friends. His daughter thinks his idea is crazy. Ethel wants to do what is practical, conventional, and boring. She wants to use her father's newfound money to order an impressive cemetery headstone with the family's name engraved in large letters and, thereby, purchase social standing.

The father, pitying his daughter for her failure to perceive beauty and her lack of appreciation of anything but the most practical, can't help but despair: "That's what ails everybody 'round here—little, shriveled-up peanut size souls."

Pop is telling his daughter and everyone like her that they are failing to perceive the glory of life—its high peaks and sweet poetry. People who believe in a big God have big imaginations. We seek glimpses of God in beauty, art, and knowledge. We develop reflexes of awe, reverence, compassion, gratitude, enthusiasm, and delight. We see past the false paths that lead us off the track and follow our highest, unique paths. Some days we need to give up our good, boring life, and follow Christ.

When we imagine the goodness of God, we are emboldened to do more imaginative things. We open our mind. Open our heart. Say the first word of kindness. Listen to people we do not like. Pray for the bullies. Look poor people in the eye. Give to people who will never pay us back.

The God beyond our imagination invites us to imagine more. Trust God's love. Believe in God's grace. Listen for the divine loving voice, inviting us to live large.

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