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“Being Happy with What We Have”

Exodus 20:17

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You will not covet your neighbor's house. You will not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

—Exodus 20:17

I sort of hate the Dekalb Market Hall. It is an amazing, delightful, underground food court in downtown Brooklyn, and I kind of, can't deal with it. And I'm usually the one who suggests it. There are so many mouthwatering options—soul food, Indian curries, potato pierogis. 35 vendors, the whole world of flavors. It's tasty, fun, and fattening. Real live foodies go there.

My problem with Dekalb Market Hall is that it's designed to make you covet, and it works. Diners share picnic tables in the aisles, so Pakistani lamb chops are next to Japanese rice crepes. Most people don't have a problem deciding what they want. They look at the choices, say, "Katz's Deli, pastrami," and never look back, never question their decision, and never glance at another's plate.

Some of us find that hard. I wander around, looking at other people's food. Do I want something new or go with something I know I like? I've never had a Colombian cornmeal cake or a fried chicken scallion pancake. The Ecuadoran breakfast looks interesting. Italian sandwiches, Cuban sandwiches, chopped brisket sandwiches.

In my experience, most food looks delicious when it's on someone else's plate. I walk around in circles, feeling overwhelmed. I get hungrier, "That looks good, but so does that." In my defense, I don't covet the salads.

When I finally do pick, I still can't let it go. I like what I

get, but not as much as I would have liked what the people at the table to my left are eating. Why didn't I order that? My Chinese noodles are fine, but coveting the street tacos makes me enjoy my noodles just a little less. It's tempting, easy, and sinful to spend our lives looking at what's on someone else's plate.

Our nation's economy runs on the knowledge that we want what everyone else has. Marketers have figured out how covetous we are and how to make money off of our selfishness. They try to persuade us that we can finally be happy if we just buy what they are selling. They just have to convince us that they have packaged contentment in a bottle, box, or barrel. Amazon.com has screen after screen filled with products that no one needs, and yet they promise our lives will be painfully incomplete until we order their stuff.

We get the same lies over and over— "Getting more will make us happier," "The good life is having expensive things," "Everyone should want more."

We get caught in an endless cycle of acquisition that never satisfies. How much do we really need before we can be content? If the advertisers do their job we will always want more.

In the 1960s, Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk living in a monastery, having taken a vow of silence, wrote: "Do everything you can to avoid the business of people. Don't read their newspapers, if you can help it. Be glad if you can keep beyond the reach of their radios. Don't bother with their intolerable concerns for the way people look. Do not complicate your life by looking at their magazines."

Most of us are not going to follow Merton's advice,

and, in some ways, it is really bad advice, but it should not surprise us that away from society's consumerism, away from pop-up ads and commercials, Merton was really happy.

Advertisements are too good at making us want more. In the last few years, they have learned to target us in new, insidious ways. We think we are too smart to fall for it. We know that things won't make us happy, but that does not keep us from acting, at times, as if we believe the lie.

We don't think of ourselves as materialistic, because we don't want much, we just want more. Wanting more is so American. Not wanting more is unamerican. How does envying our neighbor hurt our neighbor anyway? If breaking any commandment seems harmless, it is the tenth one.

But the Hebrew people came to believe that God doesn't think coveting is harmless. They listened carefully, and thought they heard God say, "No setting your eye on your neighbor's house—or wife or servant or maid or ox or donkey. Don't set your heart on anything that's your neighbor's."

The idea that "wife" is lumped together with "oxen and donkeys" has rankled more than a few women and, unfortunately, not quite as many men, through the centuries, but the point is that God cares not just about what we do, but also about what we think, our desires as well as our actions.

God looks into the dark regions of our heart where greed and envy lurk. God wants us to stop thinking that we deserve what our neighbor has and that anything our neighbor has that we do not have somehow diminishes us.

Stanley Hauerwas writes, “This last commandment tells us what all ten are about—that we were created to love God, and when that love is misdirected, life degenerates into a jumble of disordered desires, fragments testifying that we were meant to be something other than what we have become.”

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus says, “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: blasphemy, murder, adultery, coveting.”

Jesus includes coveting on the same list with murder.

In Colossians, Paul writes, “Put to death therefore whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, evil desire, and covetousness.”

Saint Paul lists coveters with adulterers.

But it still does not seem that bad, so we quietly nurture our desires for what is not ours. You decide you are going to spend a week in Maine this summer. You find a nice b&b in Bar Harbor. You are looking forward to the parks and the seafood, leisurely strolls along the water. You tell your brother who says, “That sounds great. We’re going to Beijing—the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square. It’s going to be amazing.”

And suddenly, sadly, Maine does not seem quite as exciting. Isn’t it curious how much better something looks when someone else has it? A cartoon pictures an aerial view of the corners of four pastures at the point where they intersect. There is a cow in each pasture, and each cow is reaching through the fence to eat the grass in the next pasture. The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

We might think that when everyone has green grass

no one covets, but it does not work that way. Getting more does not cure jealousy, because it is not about what we have. The problem is that we believe the lie that we need more. The tragedy is that people waste their lives believing the lie.

Leo Tolstoy's story, "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" is about a peasant who is offered all the land he can go around in one day. He runs as fast as he can, and at high noon, when he should turn back, he runs faster, because he sees a section of woodland that he has to have. About three o'clock he finally turns back and now has to hurry because part of the bargain is that at sunset he has to be back at the starting point. As the sun begins to sink, he puts on a tremendous burst of speed, and as he reaches his goal, he falls dead. So they give him all the land a person needs—six feet of it.

Coveting does more damage than we realize. Envy locks us in a small, selfish world. When we focus on what we want, we forget what others need. We get to the place where we can't see anyone else, because we only see ourselves.

One of Aesop's fables is as ugly as can be. A person dreamed that he could have anything he wished, but that whatever he received would be given double to the neighbor whom he envied. He wished for a new home and got one, but his neighbor's house was twice as large. He wished for a fine horse and his wish was granted, but his neighbor received two horses. Eaten up with envy, his next wish was that he go blind in one eye.

If everyone else were going to get twice as much, for what would we wish? Coveting prevents us from enjoying

what is already ours. We don't appreciate our lives, because we can't stop comparing ours to everyone else's. Coveting makes us less satisfied not only with what we have chosen, but with everything. Our angst about what we don't have becomes greater than our joy at what we have.

Coveting makes us blind to our own wealth and prevents us from seeing the beauty that surrounds us. So many people do not enjoy their home because their eyes are fixed on their neighbor's home. They do not celebrate the friendships available to them because they covet more glamorous friends. Coveting robs us of what's ours. What we need to see is that we have more than we need.

The Talmud says, "Who are the mighty people? Those who are satisfied with what they have."

For some eastern religions, like Buddhism, the goal is to have no desires. They believe that perfect peace comes in wanting nothing—and we can learn from that. Judaism and Christianity, however, take a different view, that God has provided us with a universe filled with good things, and that God intends for us to enjoy these gifts.

Once upon a time a wealthy father takes his son to the country to show him how rich they are. They spend the afternoon on the meager farm of a distant relative.

On their way home the father asks, "Did you see how poor people can be?"

"Yes, I did. I saw that we don't have a dog, and they have four. We have a pool in our building, and they have a creek that has no end. We have lamps outside and they have stars."

The truly rich people are not those who have the most, but those who are happiest with what they have. In Patty Jane's House of Curl, Avel Ames, a cereal tycoon, realizes that he has been coveting all of his life and wants to stop: "Is it every man and woman's curse to want it all and only get ten percent of it? Or do we ask too much? Are we too selfish to see the beauty of our every days, to revel in our every hours, blinded as we are by what everybody else has?"

For most of us, if we were to lose everything we have, and then have it returned to us, we would be the happiest people in the world. That is another way of saying that we don't need anything else to make us happy.

The way to follow this commandment is to see that we have enough. We are not consumers always needing more. We are the children of God given more grace than we imagine.

"Thou shalt not covet" is another way of saying, "If you're going to be happy, you have to learn to live in a world where people have more than you, are brighter than you, and are better looking than you. If you want what isn't yours, it will keep you from seeing what is yours."

When we covet, our lives are small and petty, but when we open our eyes to God's goodness, we have a big, wide world. The opposite of covetousness is love. The antidote for envy is grace. The extent to which we are grateful is the extent to which we are joyful.

God offers a good, simple, abundant life. God wants us to stop looking at what's on everyone else's plate, and be grateful for the love we have been given.