

THE RICHEST OF FARE

Exodus 20:1-6 The 1st Commandment:

20 And God spoke all these words: ²“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ³“You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

John 6:22-29

²² The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. ²³ Then some boats from Tiberius landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. ²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.” ²⁸ Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” ²⁹ Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

MESSAGE:

The First Commandment contains a fearful threat and a gracious promise. God loves us and wants to give us everything we need to be perfectly happy, but if we rebel against Him and break His commands, we will provoke His anger and bring down a host of miseries upon ourselves, our children and their children. Sounds like a no-brainer, but people consistently choose the latter alternative. The question is: why? Why do we do this? What *is* there in us that causes us to choose rebellion and misery rather than living in harmony with a loving God? The answer, of course, is *sin*.

Sin, convinces us that we know better than God what is good for us. Sin, like a malignant cancer, grows, engulfs and destroys everything it touches. If there is any claim of the Bible that has been empirically proven a thousand times over, it is that human beings are sinful. It's not necessary to cite horrors like the holocaust as evidence of man's propensity for evil; the recent events at a concert in Las Vegas are ample proof. The FBI has literally searched around the world to find the murderer's motive for killing fifty-nine people he didn't know, yet no motive has been found. Human beings do awful things to each other for the simple reason that they are naturally prone to do such things. In order to control

sinful behavior, civilization establishes laws and threatens punishment to those who break them. Sometimes the controls work. Sometimes they don't.

The horrible nature of man's sinfulness is portrayed dramatically by the author William Golding in his popular novel of the late 1950's: *Lord of the Flies*. It is a story about a group of English choirboys who are shipwrecked on a small, uninhabited island. There, in the absence of any controlling authority, the boys abandon civilized restraints and revert to barbarism. Fearful and afraid, they begin to imagine that there is a beast on the island seeking to hunt them down and kill them. Convinced that they need supernatural help to protect them from the beast, they kill a wild pig, stick its head on a pole and begin to worship it, calling it "the Lord of the flies." The name is from a Hebrew word, "Beelzebub," which means "lord of the flies, and is one of the titles given to Satan in the Bible. They pray to the lord of the flies, asking it to protect them from the beast, but their fear only increases and drives them to more and more barbaric behavior. They split into two mutually antagonistic groups, each group believing that the other one is in league with "the beast," and begin to hunt down and kill each other. Finally, one of the boys realizes what is happening and says to another boy: "*The beast is us.*"

Man is born with a beast in him, a sinful nature inherited from his parents which rages against God and drives us to "go our own way." Even if someone does not believe in the sinfulness of mankind as a whole, when he looks honestly within himself he cannot deny his own sinfulness. Each of us nurses the hidden knowledge that he is guilty before God, that we have not lived up to what we should be. Our conscience accuses us for things we think and say and do. We hate the fact that we have sinned and we hate the fact that no matter how hard we try, we continue to sin. We want to shake this feeling of guilt, of being somehow out of sync with our better nature, but we don't know how. We long for something that would give us inner peace.

This desire to shake a feeling of guilt and receive inner peace is a God-given thing that is called *repentance*. Repentance is the remorse we feel over the sins we've committed combined with a desire to stop committing them. And when we experience this repentance we can turn in one of two directions for help. One way will lead us to our Savior; the other way will plop us smack into the arms of the greatest con-man in history: our enemy Satan: the real lord of the flies. One way is a blessing; the other way is a disaster.

The schoolboys chose the disastrous way: they set up an idol to protect them from "the beast." Many people follow their example. They may not stick a pig's head on a pole and bow down to it, but they set up other idols to worship and serve. Some people convince themselves that more money will solve their problem with greed. Others persuade themselves that giving themselves over to lust will satisfy their sexual urges. Others imagine that eating more and more will satisfy their appetite. Still others decide that giving vent to their temper is a good way of getting rid of their anger. Such people imagine—against the testimony of their own experience—that serving their sin's idol is the best way to placate their sin. More money satisfies greed; fornication or pornography satisfies lust;

food satisfies gluttony; temper tantrums get rid of anger. They forget—or choose not to remember—that sin doesn't satisfy appetites—it inflames them. Our idols don't reward us for serving them, they consume us.

Thus is the mind of man led down the primrose path to misery, despair and death. And so it's no accident that God's terrible warning and gracious promise, which shows man the true, the right and the divine way to peace, is attached to the First Commandment. Luther considered the First Commandment, the Command to love God and shun all idols, to be both the beginning and the end of God's Law. God calls Himself a "jealous God" because He loves and cherishes His children and hates the idols they set up in their imagination which draw them away from Him. He knows that although these idols are worthless, they appeal to our sinful natures and have the power to lead us into misery and death.

There's an old Humphrey Bogart movie called *The Maltese Falcon*. It's a story about a bejeweled solid gold statuette in the form of a falcon that has been pursued by men down through the centuries. They all dream that owning the Maltese falcon will bring them unimaginable wealth and happiness and so they scheme and plot and kill in order to possess it. Ultimately, though, it turns out that the Maltese falcon is a fake and is made of lead rather than gold and all the scheming and conniving and killing has been in vain. When a policeman asks Sam Spade at the end of the movie what the Maltese falcon actually is, he answers: "*The stuff that dreams are made of.*"

What a perfect example of an idol! It promises life and happiness and delivers suffering and death. There are three things that await all those who abandon hope in God's love and provision and seek it in idols: sin, misery and death.

There is a second way to respond to repentance—a divine way—and it is revealed to us in the good news that God has given us a gracious promise that far surpasses his warning. While He threatens to punish up to three or four generations of those who hate Him, He promises to show love to a thousand generations of those who love him. God's love surpasses His anger! His grace supercedes His wrath—in the Bible's mathematics by a ratio of two-hundred and fifty to one! We cannot out-sin God's willingness to forgive, for as Paul wrote; "*Where sin did abound, grace did super-abound...for neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!*" [Romans 8:38-39]

God's love in Jesus Christ reaches to the very ends of creation and He promises nothing but good to those who love him back. And how do we love God? We love Him first of all by trusting Jesus Christ for our salvation, for as Jesus said, "*The work of God is to believe in the One He has sent.*" (John 6:29) And how do we believe—and continue to believe? By nourishing ourselves on the food His Son provides in's his Word and His sacramental body and blood. This is what Isaiah is referring to in our *Old Testament* lesson for today when he says, "*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no*

money, come, buy and eat! Why spend money on what is not bread and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest of fare! Give ear and come to me; hear me that your soul may live!" (Isaiah 55:1-3) When we hear the Word of God and discern in it the love of Jesus Christ, we are truly eating the bread of heaven. When we eat and drink the visible Word in the sacrament of the altar, we are dining on manna from heaven which nourishes us to eternal life. When the Word came to Brantley Rediger and Ollie Chism today in the waters of baptism, they were washed clean, adopted into God's family as His beloved children, and received the gift of eternal life.

An idol has the power to devour all our sacrifices until we have nothing left to give. Then it turns and devours us.

God's love in Jesus Christ has the power to cast down all idols, deliver us from their control, and give us eternal life.

The grace of God, the love of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you all. Amen.