



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“All That Glitters”

Daniel 3:1-19

October 29, 2017

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Today our series on the 10 commandments continues as we focus on the first two commandments. Let's start with #2: thou shalt not make for yourself an idol. If I were to walk around among you with a basket, asking you to turn over your gold rings, necklaces, watches, etc. in order to melt them down and make a golden cow, I'm betting that none of you would participate. This second commandment doesn't seem very relevant to us. We don't have a problem with idols. We don't worship golden calves. We don't spend more time with objects than we spend with God. That's what I was thinking until last weekend.

Someone in my household lost their phone. Misplaced it would be more accurate. An iPhone is never lost. Because there is that handy *Find My iPhone* feature that tells you exactly where it is. We were determined to track it down. All other plans were put on hold. There was no higher priority. We drove around until we were close to where the app indicated the phone was supposed to be. We knocked on the doors of three separate houses asking them if they had seen the phone. We received permission to look in their backyards. The owners of these homes were really quite gracious about the whole thing. I have to say that the third time we knocked on one door their graciousness felt a little forced. Despite all of this effort, we did not find the phone. We experienced a whole weekend without it. All weekend we felt uneasy, vulnerable, anxious, tense, incomplete. (Monday morning the phone was located. *Find My iPhone* had been giving us a less than accurate reading.)

All this energy, all this searching for an object. Did you know that gold, silver, iron and tungsten can be found in an iPhone? Maybe the second commandment does have something to say to us.

When paired with the first commandment (you shall have no other gods before me), these two caution against placing anything—person, idea, object, project—ahead of God. Figuring out how to avoid doing that while living and working in this world of ours, well that's a pretty tricky business.

The Bible has a good story about figuring out this kind of thing. The book of Daniel tells the story of three Jewish princes named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They end up in Babylon, in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, the Persian king—brought there after their own country has been defeated.¹

They are striking fellows—strong, handsome and intelligent. Far away from home, they try to keep a connection to their God and their faith. They don't eat at the king's table, preferring to keep kosher. But the king doesn't mind that too much and he gives them honored places in his government.

One day, the king erects a huge gold statue, nine feet wide and ninety feet high. Nebuchadnezzar sends for all of the people who matter and orders them to fall down and worship the statue.

¹ This sermon is indebted to a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor found in *Bread of Angels*, p. 17-22.

Everyone does—except Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The text doesn't say why but my best guess is that they haven't been in Babylon long enough to forget all of the 10 commandments. Even if they are a bit fuzzy on numbers 9 and 10, they remember numbers 1 and 2.

“Thou shall have no other gods before me. Don't bow down before idols,” the commandments say. It sounds so simple—so straightforward. If tomorrow, the mayor and governor got together and decide that all Columbus residents are required to march to Ohio Stadium and bow down before a ninety-foot high statue of Brutus—we would all decline to participate. (I am right about that, aren't I?)

Things are rarely that clear cut. We all regularly make large and small accommodations to the larger culture. And, I'll be honest, sometimes I just don't get folks who aren't willing to make those concessions. In 1995, Brigham Young football standout and devout Mormon Eli Herring turned down the opportunity to play in the National Football League because that would involve working on the Sabbath. I have to admit if I had a son facing a similar dilemma I would say to him, “Are you crazy? We're talking the NFL. Find a church that has a Wednesday night service.”

I know a committed pacifist who refuses to pay her federal taxes because a portion of that money supports the production of weapons of mass destruction. To date the IRS has been less than sympathetic.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego pay their taxes and—if drafted—would play for the NFL. And they own iPhones. They long ago made the decision that religious purity was not possible in Babylon. They take it one step further. They actually work for the king. The king protects them and their community. Much is at stake in keeping the king happy.

But something else is at stake for the three young men. They are Jewish. It was easy being a good Jew back in Jerusalem. But that's not where they find themselves. They try—they really try to be faithful to their tradition. But can you do that and be on the payroll of a pagan king? When do you compromise and live to see another day and when do you stop and take a stand?

I'm sure it is a constant topic of conversation among the three men: “If I take this promotion, will I compromise my identity? If I accept this award from the king, will I have totally sold out? Can I attend this Babylonian festival and still call myself a believer? If I carry out this order, can I still claim to be faithful to God?” And up until that fateful day, the answer to that last question has always been “yes.”

But this time they say “no.” Maybe if the statue had been only thirty feet high and made out of silver, they play along. But, they can't bow down before a ninety-foot-high gold statue. They won't cross that line.

Let's shift focus and head down south to Texas. Where football is king. At the high school and college level, nothing is more sacred than football. We here in Columbus know all about the fun side of living in a town shaped by a strong college football program. That sense of community—that sense of connection—the rituals, the songs, the cheers—it is powerful and appealing. The state of Texas is like the city of Columbus on game day. The state just loves football.

Paul Quinn College is located just south of Dallas. In 2007, a new president named Michael Sorrell arrives on campus. Things are not going well for the historically black college. The graduation rate is 1%, the facility is in disrepair, enrollment is down, and the college is about to lose its accreditation. For his part, Sorrell has no experience running a college. One of the first things he does as president is shut down the football program. It is not a popular move. Sorrell makes a case that the college's neighbors matter even more than football. Paul Quinn is located in a federally-recognized food desert. Sorrell decides to develop an organic farm on the best available piece of land on campus: the football field. The farm produces and provides more than 10,000 pounds

of organic produce per year with 10% of that total donated to non-profit organizations that feed their neighbors. The rest of the food is sold to high-end restaurants and grocers throughout the Dallas area. The name of this enterprise? The We over Me Farm.

The decision to stop bowing down to the altar of football and begin serving their neighbors was the beginning of good things for Paul Quinn. In recent years, it has become a model for a new way to be a successful urban college. There's a mission statement that shapes the school. Every student knows it and tries to live by it.

- LEAVE places better than you found them.
- LEAD from wherever you are.
- LIVE a life that matters.
- LOVE something greater than yourself.

We borrowed the third L for this year's annual campaign. Living a life that matters is all about figuring out what lasts, what's important, what leads us away from isolation and towards God and towards community and then putting the weight of our resources—time, energy, love, money—into those things. At its best this church supports us in living lives that matter and inviting and encouraging others to do the same.

Loving something greater than ourselves, leaving places better than we find them—this leads to good things not just for ourselves but for others. Living a life that matters is about not chasing after those things that don't satisfy, that take us out of relationship with God and with others.

Friday I received an email inviting me to purchase the iPhone X. The email described it like this:

The future of the smartphone, in a gorgeous all-glass design with a beautiful 5.8-inch Super Retina display, A11 Bionic chip, wireless charging and an improved rear camera with dual optical image stabilization. iPhone X delivers an innovative and secure new way for customers to unlock, authenticate and pay using Face ID, enabled by the new TrueDepth camera.

I don't know what half of those things mean but I know that I want that phone and that it will change my life.

Except it won't. It's a means to an end. A really cool means to an end and I hope to own one someday but it's a means to an end. It is not the end itself. A new phone, a new car, a new job, success at work—none of these things will heal us. Redeem us. Save us. That work belongs to God and God alone. Putting God first in this complicated world is challenging and difficult. Most of us spend a good deal of time working, shopping, learning, exercising, interacting in environments shaped by values that are not ours. Living in Babylon is messy, challenging, chaotic and I believe it is exactly where God wants us to be.

Isolation has never been the Presbyterian way. There are no Presbyterian hermits. We have always been out there in the world. We have fought in wars, served in government, worked in business. This is not widely known but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were Presbyterians.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” That's an easy commandment to keep if we never leave the Christian enclave. But, because we are willing to live out our faith out there in the world, things can get complicated. And interesting. And at times risky. Just ask Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Hey, but everything turns out all right for them. They emerge unscathed from the furnace of burning fire and they actually get a promotion. But when the three make their decision to defy the king, they do not know if they will live or die. They say, “If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire, let

him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” They decide to stick with God, no matter what.

That’s the challenge. That’s the struggle. That’s the joy.

Amen.