



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor’s Really Awesome Vacation”

Philippians 4:1-13

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In this last sermon in our Ten Commandments series, we focus on two commandments. I grouped them together because numbers eight and ten seem to cover similar territory. Don’t mess with other people’s stuff. Or as the Minnesota version of the Commandments translates these two:

If it ain’t your lutefisk, don’t take it.
Keep your mind off your neighbor’s hot dish.¹

The eighth commandment is perhaps the most straightforward of the ten. You shall not steal. Don’t take that which is not yours. This prohibits all sorts of things from cheating on taxes to armed robbery.

Finally, a commandment we can feel relatively good about it. I’ve never committed armed robbery. Have you?

Let’s take a minute and bask in a well-deserved moment of righteousness. It feels pretty good, doesn’t it? Don’t get too comfortable. It’s not going to last. Because we still have to deal with that pesky tenth commandment.

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

No one gets off clean on this one.

The question is not do you covet. It’s what do you covet? We don’t covet in theory. We don’t covet in the abstract.

I covet an electric car. I covet an iPhone X. I covet skin that tans. I can’t tell you how much I would love to be tan. I covet a small camper trailer. Think Airstream except really small and designed by someone who either works for NASA or is from Sweden.² This new breed of camper trailers are retro and high tech and are so incredibly cool and I want one.

I have to say that the older I get the less I covet things and the more I covet experiences. I covet tickets to the latest and best Broadway show. I covet really cool vacations—bike trips in Tuscany, hikes into the Grand Canyon.

We know coveting. It’s impossible not to covet. The U.S. is the world’s largest economy and the world’s largest consumer market, making us the world’s top coveters. We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire is eating away at our collective soul. Coveting leads us to acquire things that we do not need and that do not satisfy.

¹ <http://www.sawdustcityllc.com/the-10-commandments-minnesota-style-1-ders-only-one-god/>

² <https://www.thespruce.com/glamping-worthy-camping-trailers-3017221>

“I have learned to be content with whatever I have,” Paul writes in Philippians. Paul, how did that happen? Did you stay content? How do we experience that same thing? How do we get past this gnawing discontent?

Search your mind for snapshots of contentment and satisfaction. We are usually surrounded by people we love. We have a feeling of fullness. We have a sense that present life is abundant and good... that we have enough—enough stuff, enough love, enough meaning, enough community.

How do we live a more satisfied life? One possible way to combat the discontent of coveting is gratitude. Gratitude is popular these days and for good reason.

Writer Anne Lamott writes this about gratitude.

...gratitude, thankfulness, that sense of having been helped, saved, seen, enriched by life, a good person, a lucky break is magic. When we feel it, or even walk with it for part of every day, gratitude is a magnetic energy that draws people to us, because it is the most wonderful and attractive of emotions. When you are with someone who has developed the habit of gratitude, you SO want what they have. They are not grasping for more. They are savoring, shaking their heads slightly with the most quiet wonder. Gratitude contains a heightened and amazed realization of how much goodness is marbled into our strange and sometimes hard, annoying lives... Gratitude tugs on our sleeves and says, “Wake up!” Look around at the kindness that surrounds us, the love we are being shown, the hope that now makes sense.³

Lamott makes a beautiful case for the power of gratitude. So this past week I decided to focus on gratitude. Thanksgiving week—how hard it could be? We have a national holiday dedicated to gratitude. But before that, I had jury duty. Yes, jury duty. I had jury duty the same week that I planned to focus on gratitude. So I awoke Monday morning feeling deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve my country and community in this meaningful way.

No.

When I woke up Monday morning, I was not happy. I was irritated, resentful, aggravated, aggrieved. I am an important person who has important things to do. I don't have time for jury duty. I was annoyed and that annoyance deepened as it took me twenty minutes to find parking and another twenty minutes to get through security at the courthouse. I was so not feeling grateful.

Have any of you been a juror in Franklin County Municipal Court? It's a bit of a surprise. The man who runs it, Jury Commissioner Tom Shields, is passionate about making jury duty the best possible experience. And Franklin County Municipal Court is considered the model for the nation in how to do this civic thing right. Within a few hours I discovered that jury duty—really—I can't believe I'm going to use this word to describe it—is lovely.

Let me give you a partial list of things I am grateful for related to jury duty:

- the incredibly competent and thoughtful people who organize the jury process
- the Deputy Commissioner who graciously excused me from jury duty on Tuesday so I could attend a luncheon and be on time for our community thanksgiving meal here at the church

³ <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/945895655540078:0>

- the parking lot attendant who welcomes you into the lot when you show him your juror nametag even though the sign out front says “full”
- better Wi-Fi than we have here at the church.
- better coffee than we have at the church.
- the opportunity to tour the Ohio Supreme Court, hear from judges, magistrates, the county recorder and auditor, observe court in session, tour the county jail—in other words, the opportunity to learn—I am always grateful for that

I’m going back tomorrow morning for my second week of jury duty with a different attitude. Reminded of the power of gratitude to open us up to new experiences and better ways of moving through the world. Gratitude helps us fully inhabit the life we actually have rather than covet the life we do not have. Wanting what we don’t have makes us small, clenched, afraid. Feeling that we have been blessed makes us expansive, open, generous.

Gratitude takes discipline, developing rituals and practices that lead us away from a sense of entitlement and towards a sense of thankfulness.

My family’s gratitude practice is simple and straightforward. We borrowed it from a Broad Street family. At the dinner table, each of us names one thing that we are grateful for—just one thing. In that day. And we try to keep it specific and tangible and it’s OK to focus on the food you are about to eat. On more than one occasion, I have been grateful for butter. I think butter is pretty awesome.

If I look back on my day and struggle to identify one thing that I am grateful for, then I know that I need to look hard at what is not working in my life and make adjustments. Every day lived in this world—even one of our hardest days—is an opportunity for gratitude.

The opposite of gratitude, I think, is entitlement, the corrosive idea that the world owes us—owes us a good job, a spouse, a child. The world owes us none of these things. The air we breathe, the sunrise we watch, the music we enjoy, the books we read, the people who infuriate us and delight us—all gifts—all gifts from God our creator.

The commandments tell us: Thou shall not steal. Thou shall not covet.

May God help us to follow those commandments.

And, more importantly, may God continue to lead us on the path of gratitude.