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Galatians 5:13-14, 22-26 & Joshua 7: 1, 6-7, 10-13, 18-21

The Economics of Justice. Coveting & Idolatry: Devoted Things

We are beginning a new 4-week sermon series looking at how the scriptures address justice issues within the frame of economics. The Bible has a lot to say about money, about poverty, about wealth, about unequal distribution of assets. It has a lot to say about this on an individual and personal level. And it has a lot to say about this topic on a societal level.

For this series I will be relying on themes and expositions from Walter Brueggemann *Poverty in the Promised Land. Neighborliness, Resistance and Restoration*, a book which includes a series of reflections on the book *Poverty, by America* by sociologist Mathew Desmond.

Desmond shares that “The United States, the richest country on earth, has more poverty than any other advanced democracy. Why? Why does this land of plenty allow one in every eight of its children to go without basic necessities, permit scores of its citizens to live and die on the streets, and authorize its corporations to pay poverty wages? We stockpile opportunity in exclusive communities, creating zones of concentrated riches alongside those of concentrated despair. Some lives are made small so that others may grow.” Our PCO library has purchased two copies of *Poverty, by America*, along with some other books focusing on economic justice. I invite you to check them out.

We start this morning on the individual level, the ways that coveting – the envy and desire of what others have – is enmeshed in those things we value, the idols we make. The book of Joshua is the first book following the end of the Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew scripture. Moses has led the people out of slavery, wandering through the wilderness and desert for 40 years. Joshua is chosen as Moses’ successor and it is he who leads the people into Canaan and into battles that eventually give the Hebrew people the land that becomes the nation of Israel.

The book of Joshua begins with the reconnaissance of the territory in Canaan and then the ritual preparations for warfare. The middle of the book focuses on battles to control the territory. The end of Joshua is focused on the distribution of the spoils of warfare and renewal of the Hebrew people’s covenant with God. Our scripture this morning comes from the battle section, specifically battle of Ai. The Hebrews had just conquered Jericho – the walls came a tumbling down – and Joshua gives them explicit instructions: “As for you, keep away from the things devoted to destruction, so as not to covet and take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel an object for destruction, bringing trouble upon it. But all silver and gold and vessels of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord¹.” Hear now the story of what happens next from Joshua chapter 7:

¹ Joshua 6:18-20

¹But the Israelites broke faith in regard to the devoted things: Achan son of Carmi son of Zabdi son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things, and the anger of the Lord burned against the Israelites.

⁶Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the ground on his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening, he and the elders of Israel, and they put dust on their heads. ⁷ Joshua said, “Ah, Lord God! Why have you brought this people across the Jordan at all, to hand us over to the Amorites so as to destroy us? Would that we had been content to settle beyond the Jordan!

¹⁰ The Lord said to Joshua, “Stand up! Why have you fallen on your face? ¹¹ Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I imposed on them. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have acted deceitfully, and they have put them among their own belongings. ¹² Therefore the Israelites are unable to stand before their enemies; they turn their backs to their enemies because they have become a thing devoted for destruction themselves. I will be with you no more unless you destroy the devoted things from among you. ¹³ Proceed to sanctify the people and say, ‘Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: There are devoted things among you, O Israel; you will be unable to stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you.

¹⁸ And he brought near his household one by one, and Achan son of Carmi son of Zabdi son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken. ¹⁹ Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and make confession to him. Tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.” ²⁰ And Achan answered Joshua, “It is true; I am the one who sinned against the Lord God of Israel. This is what I did: ²¹ when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them and took them. They now lie hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.” **This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

It's back to school season here in Michigan and across the country. And even if you are long past your back to school days or those of your kids or grandkids, it is hard not to be swept up into the momentum. If you are on social media, it is particularly pronounced. I should know better than to click on the posts, but just this week I found myself following a link asking the profound question “Why didn't we have this when we were growing up?” and it led me to a Insta post with a “Mr. Pen Eraser”. According to the post “they are a total game-changer for back to school! ... they keep desks neat and make erasing fun! They're eco-friendly and come in the cutesttttt pastel colors.” Note that cutest was spelled “c-u-t-e-s-t-t-t-t-t”, because apparently something is definitively cute if there are 5-t's associated with it. ²

² <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNjSdnlhDbh/>

The post turned out to be on an Instagram site called, I kid you not, everything.envy.³ This site features all kinds of things that people in our modern world covet from cow slippers for babies to a colored can pop-top opener (protects your nails and helps you know which can is yours at a party). I finally closed out of the site after almost purchasing an insert that you can put into a lemon or lime that collects the juice when you squeeze it. And while I wasted far too much time on the everything.envy Insta page (all in the name of sermon research, I promise!), I can't help but be conscious of how much of our world is constructed around coveting, envy and idolatry. I take solace in (and despair a bit) that this is a theme as old as time – back to Garden and coveting knowledge that one didn't have, to Cain and Abel fighting over whose gift was valued more.

God knew that the people needed guidance in this arena and established a covenant with the people – the Ten Commandments – which established what a right relationship looks like between the people and God and the people with each other. And our story this morning is a great example of what breaking that covenant looks like. Achan broke the covenant. We hear plainly in verses 10-11: The Lord said to Joshua, “Stand up! Why have you fallen on your face? Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I imposed on them. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have acted deceitfully, and they have put them among their own belongings.”

To understand the full significance of Israel's violation – via the soldier Achan – it is helpful to know a bit more about the book of Joshua. Theologically the book of Joshua has proved problematic interpretatively as it focuses on the conquest of the indigenous populations in the land of Canaan.⁴ What do we do with scriptures that don't fit our understanding of our world today or even our understanding of God? Of a God who set down covenants and laws that mandated loving your neighbor and encouraged us to welcome the stranger and the foreigner; Jesus, who dined with and healed those outside of the Jewish faith, and the apostles and early church which expanded the bounds of ministry to include diverse populations throughout the land. In other words, what do we do when our understanding of who God is and what God calls us to do doesn't jive with what we read in scripture?

Some people make a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. That is that in the Old Testament, God is judgmental and punitive. And the New Testament God is all about love and peace. I think this is problematic theologically because as Christians, we understand the Trinitarian God we worship is one God throughout what scripture reveals. I also think that it negates the vast number of times we see God pour out grace and love, from everlasting to everlasting, in the Old Testament scriptures, and the times we see Jesus talking about judgment and the need for repentance.

³ <https://www.instagram.com/everything.envy/?hl=en>

⁴ I appreciate the work of Gregory Mobley. Joshua. In: *Theological Bible Commentary*. Ed. by Gail R. O'Day and David L. Peterson. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009 for helping to flesh out this understanding.

Other strategies have been to ignore or cut-out the passages that are problematic, creating our own version of the scripture that fits with our beliefs. In the Reformed Tradition, we believe that the scriptures were written by humans and are the inspired word of God, designed to teach us about who God is and how we are to be in relation to God and each other. We also accept that through the work of the Holy Spirit, the canon of scriptures was assembled. By cherry-picking the scriptures that resonate with us, and ignoring or actively rejecting the rest, we place ourselves in the position of being God, of being sovereign.

A third strategy that has been employed, and the one that I was steeped in in my seminary training, is to dig in the history and context of the scripture, understanding how a passage is addressing a situation in a particular place and time. And while our particularities may be different in 2025 mid-Michigan, there are principles we can learn about who God is and who we are called to be as a people of God that transcend a particular place and time.

Biblical scholars often refer to this process of understanding scripture as exploring the world behind the text. Using this framework we acknowledge that the book of Joshua, like many books in the Bible, was not written contemporaneously with the events it was depicting. Joshua, along with the books of Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings form what is known as “The Deuteronomistic History.” This history seeks to explain the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon to 586 BCE as a consequence of Israelite disobedience. The key tenet of these history books is that there is one Lord God of Israel who has established a covenant with God’s people. The people of God are to live by this covenant. A lack of faithfulness, loyalty and trust in the Lord God, and a failure to follow the covenant, leads to tragic consequences.

When the book of Joshua was written it was a look back in history, answering the question how did we get to the pinnacle of a united kingdom of Israel under King David and how did that kingdom fall so quickly, with the south conquered by Assyria and the north by Babylon. As we read Joshua and the other history books, we want to attend to this idea of faithfulness and obedience to God as our calling as a people. When we fail to live into God’s framework for being God’s people, there are consequences for us and for the world in which we inhabit. We see this plainly in our scripture this morning. Joshua 7 opens with the acknowledgement that the Israelites broke faith. Achan took some of the devoted things. The anger of the Lord burned against the Israelites. Said another way, the Israelites broke their covenant with God by coveting and stealing from their neighbors. And it made God mad.

The sin committed by Achan has a double dimension. It is against the Lord for transgressing the covenant and it is against the community. Achan confesses this double sin, first acknowledging that he sinned against the Lord God of Israel. And then confessing how he sinned against the community: This is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them and took them.” The sin of Achan is committed in three steps: I saw, I

coveted, I took. And what is that he took? Achan describes what he looted in terms of their value to him as an individual, what their commercial value was. But God uses another term: *devoted things*. In fact the language of *devoted things* is used eight times in this chapter. This concept was first introduced in the end of chapter 6 as the Israelites conquered Jericho: Joshua says: Do not covet and take any of the devoted things. All silver and gold and vessels of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord.

These items have value to the Lord, are devoted to the Lord, and will be used for the benefit of the whole community, not just one individual. And that gets at the heart of why this is a justice issue. In the book *Poverty in the Promised Land*, Walter Brueggemann writes about how at the end of the day, coveting is about replacing God's will for a community with shared allocation of resources with a world where our desire for more and more is harmful to the community, breaking our covenant with God. As I shared in the words of preparation, Brueggemann says: "Coveting is a violation of neighborliness. Thus, the Bible readily links together *the hidden force of inappropriate desire* and *the practical real-world acquisitiveness of such a desire* that does damage to the community. ... Inappropriate desire is tantamount to the worship of false gods. An economy of acquisitiveness that is willing and able to violate vulnerable neighbors is the embrace of a false world presided over by false gods that cannot save." ⁵

This is precisely what we see Achan do in the book of Joshua. He violated vulnerable neighbors to acquire something that gave him a false sense of success, of power, of prestige, of economic freedom. It was a false sense, because false gods cannot save. When we elevate our own status at the expense of the community, we ultimately lose out. We think we are gaining freedom to live a richer, more fruitful life. And yet as we see in our scripture from Joshua, there was no freedom for Achan. He was punished for his sins in a way that reminded the whole community that violating the covenants against coveting and idolatry laid down in the Ten Commandments is not the way to find freedom. Despite what advertisers and influencers might tell us, freedom doesn't lie in acquiring more and more. It doesn't lie in self-indulgence.

Freedom comes through Christ in loving our neighbor: "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" It is the fruits of the spirit we heard Ewen read from Galatians: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control". This is the antidote to coveting and idolatry. When we live by the fruits of the spirit, the community is elevated and we show our love for God and neighbor. This is heart of the economics of justice. May it be so.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann. *Poverty in the Promised Land. Neighborliness, Resistance and Restoration*; Fortress Press, 2024., pp 95-96.

One of the ways we affirm this understanding is through the teachings in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions. I invite you in to rise in body or in spirit and join me as we recite a section of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Q. 42. What is the sum of the Ten Commandments?

A. The sum of the Ten Commandments is: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves.

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Q. 79. Which is the Tenth Commandment?

A. The Tenth Commandment is, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's."

Q. 80. What is required in the Tenth Commandment?

A. The Tenth Commandment requireth full contentment with our own condition, with a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbor and all that is his.

Q. 81. What is forbidden in the Tenth Commandment?

A. The Tenth Commandment forbiddeth all discontentment with our own estate, envying or grieving at the good of our neighbor, and all inordinate motions and affections to anything that is his.