

082513 “No Gods Before Me” – Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Claim the Truth, Live out the Truth you have claimed,
and Trust the Assurance of the Truth you have claimed

Exodus 20:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8:1-6; John 18:33-38

I am going to divide this sermon into two weeks, so we will see how far we get today and then finish next week. The first commandment is the most important commandment, not because the others don't matter, but because the first defines the other nine. This week, I want to look at the nature of truth, because we are making a truth claim here, and next week we will look at the positive aspect of the first commandment: If I have no other gods before me, then my life is dedicated to the praise and worship of the One True God.

This commandment starts out with a very strange idea. When we say “You shall have no other gods...” we implicitly acknowledged there are in fact other gods. When God led Moses and God's people out of Israel, they were led straight into a wilderness surrounded on all sides by people who believed in many gods. There were gods and goddesses of villages, of regions, of lakes and streams, of air and sky, of houses and roads, of buildings and trees; the whole world was teeming with gods, demi-gods and spirits. Israel was constantly being led into the worship of these other gods and goddesses, in a constant struggle of return to the One True God.

Believing in one single God, one True God, was a difficult, struggling belief for not just centuries, but eons. The world changes; our relationship to God changes radically through the advent of Jesus Christ; the way things applied when Moses introduced the 10 Commandments and the way they do now are not the same and nor should they be the same.

But one thing has not really changed all that much: the draw of other gods and goddesses. We just don't call them that anymore. Our identifications of what is a god and a goddess has simply shifted and taken on new names. The first commandment becomes much more convicting and challenging when we take seriously Martin Luther's definition of “other gods” in his explication of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism:

What is it to have a god, or what is God? Answer: a god is that to which we look for all good and where we resort for help in every time of need; to have a god is simply to trust and believe in one with our whole heart. ...the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and confidence are right, then likewise your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your confidence is false, if it

is wrong, then you have not the true God. For the two, faith and God, have an inevitable connection. Now, I say, whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God. (Luther's Large Catechism, First Part, Para. 1)

The direction of your heart is the direction of your faith. Where our hearts are is where God is. And it is where our idols, our gods and goddesses also are. With Luther, we begin to see just how difficult the First Commandment really is. This is why we are spending two weeks on it. The other commandments flow directly out of this first one - "*You shall have no other gods before me*" - and if you can make it past this one, the others fall into place. But I submit to you, most of us do not make it past this very first commandment.

Why do I say that? Because we do not claim the truth of God for ourselves. We are unwilling to let our lives, personally and publicly, engage the question Pilate asks of Jesus: "*What is truth?*" Instead, we do what Pascal says of us. "*God did us the pleasure of creating us in God's own image; in gratitude we did the same thing to God*". We create God in our image. We substitute all the gods and goddesses which surround us for the One True God who created us, as 1 Corinthians 8 says today.

What are those gods and goddesses? (*Let the congregation name them?*)

Money

Success

Sex

Drugs and alcohol

the Self

Medicine

They surround us and call to us. We pay at the altar and make the exchange with the god of whatever temple we have given our heart over to. The temporary comfort allows us to continue to believe in the existence of the power of that particular god and goddess; and our giving over of our heart and payment gives power to the idea of that particular god or goddess. Where have you placed your heart?

This is why we are dealing with truth issues today in the First Commandment. Think about all the truth claims which surround Pontius Pilate in his rulership of Judea. Pilate is overseen, finally, by Caesar. Caesar upon the throne is also "Son of God" and therefore the voice of truth for all Roman authority across the lands. Pilate is a Roman and therefore likely believes in many gods and goddesses as well, all of whom have their particular mythological, moral and truthful pronouncements and claims. He rules over the unruly Jewish people, who claim only one God and have a penchant for rebelling in the name of that God. And here he is with Jesus, who is making yet one more truth claim upon the people and Pilate himself.

Except that Jesus is incredibly annoying because he can't give a straight answer. Is he a king of the Jews? Well, yes, if the Jews and Pilate acknowledge the eternal kingdom of the One True God, but the proof of this would be the Jews fighting on Jesus' behalf in this kingdom. So no, Jesus is not the king of the Jews by that definition. So Jesus' 'final answer' to the king question is *"You say that I am"*.

Then Jesus tells Pilate the reason why he came into the world: *"...to bear witness to the truth."* Jesus bears witness to the truth. As followers of Jesus, it is also what we are called to do: to bear witness to the truth as it is known through Jesus Christ. Having no other gods before God is therefore a witness to the truth we claim.

Let's define our terms with regard to truth. First, I will simply say that, for today and our purposes, truth is a 'who' question, not a 'what' question. Jesus Christ is the truth we proclaim, and all that entails. What is more important when we are talking about 'no other gods' is how we talk about truth.

I propose there are at least three ways of talking about truth: absolute claims to truth, subjective claims to truth, and provisional claims to truth.

Absolute claims to truth exist more as assertions, at least in this day and age. If I can assert the absoluteness of my devotion to a truth, the more true it is. Whether the absolute claim is the existence of God, the salvation of Jesus Christ, the creation of the world, the reality or unreality of global warming, the future of the economy, or the interpretation of Revelation, if I say it loud enough, often enough and angrily enough, I can reinforce my belief in the absolute nature of the claim. Absolute thinking demands proof, not just proof which points to a possible outcome, which would be a scientific and evaluative approach to truth, but proof which shows the absolute truth of the claim. Absolute claims to truth are the opposite of faith claims. Absolute claims to truth make demands neither Scripture nor life experience can provide. Absolute claims demand we approach the world in a way that defies change, possibility and new experiences.

An absolute claim to truth is best recognized by your reaction to listening to a news station or channel with diametrically opposite views to you. In your reaction, you get a glimpse of absolute truth claims colliding with absolute beliefs held closely. It is not that we shouldn't have closely held beliefs, but unexamined beliefs based on absolute claims is not faith. As Rev. Alan Jones of Grace Cathedral in California has said, *"Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Certainty is the opposite of faith."* Faith is a wild act of trust in the face of doubt, emptiness and despair. Faith is the brave act of hope, not certainty, not of absolutes.

The other way to approach truth claims is to make a subjective claim to the truth. A subjective claim essentially says that only my experience and my perception can be the guide for what is true and what

is not true. A thing is true, essentially, because I say it is true. The most extreme form of this view towards truth is based on feelings. It feels good, therefore it must be true.

But, sometimes really good things feel really bad. And sometimes really bad things feel really good. Sleeping around probably feels really good but has a really, really bad outcome if you are married to someone else. There are many drugs that feel really, really good when you take them, but finally taking drugs is not a good thing for you or the people around you. And sometimes there are really good things that really hurt. This is my new parenting category: *Really Good Things that Really Hurt*. The best example of this is dropping Rhiannon off at college. Nothing is better for her than to be where she is right now, and I don't really know if anything has hurt more in my time with our daughter than driving away from Simon's Rock last Saturday.

When good things feel bad and bad actions feel good, how can feelings be the determination of what is good and true and beautiful? Given the massive confusion of our feelings, how can they be a reliable guide toward truth? They can't. Nor can our personal interpretation of our personal experience. They play a part, and may sometimes help, but sometimes they do not. We remember the times it worked and forget the times our feelings failed.

The great error so many people make when they look at their lives is to universalize their personal experience. This is the problem with the subjective claim to truth – the universalisation of personal experience at the expense of the experience and thinking of others.

This leads us to something which is at once beyond and between absolute claims to truth and subjective claims to truth – the provisional claim to truth. This is where we can begin to really do the hard work of faith. A provisional claim, and by that I mean a partial claim, an incomplete claim, an open-ended claim to truth, means we have to talk to other people, we have to allow our perception of experiences and feelings to change, we have to *be in relationship* with God and with one another.

Before we go any further, let me just say the provisional view toward truth is Biblical. Do you remember God's answer to Job's challenge? Job challenges God to explain and answer why all these horrible things have happened to him. God's answer is “Where were you when I created all this? Can you do this? Can you even really conceive of it?” The answer, as we all know, is “No, we cannot conceive of it. We can only know what we see and experience, first.” And remember Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: “*Now we know only in part. We see through a glass darkly. We only know in part; one day we will know the whole.*” We do not know enough to make absolute claims and our partial knowledge means subjective, personal experience is not full enough to make any definitive claim to truth.

So we do what the Israelites did. We claim the truth which has been shown to us, to the best of

our ability. We make that claim together, just as the Jewish people do in the Shema, from Deuteronomy 6: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohenu Adonai Ehad – Hear, O Israel, God is Lord and the Lord is One.* This is what we do when we say our covenant together. We make a provisional truth claim. It is what the Creeds of the church's history are doing.

So what does this mean for us? It means we face a world without absolutes, but we are also not condemned to face a world completely alone. Instead, we, all of us, claim this truth, that there is no other God except God; even if there might be other gods and idols, their existence depends completely on the God we claim. Having made the provisional claim of truth, we seek to live out the truth claim we have made. This is what the rest of the 10 Commandments are all about. Living out those commandments reflect the commitment we have made to our claim of truth. In bearing witness with Christ, just as he says before Pilate, we trust the truth we have claimed.

Now that we have confessed what we believe to be provisionally true - “We shall have no other gods before God” - next week we can explore the positive aspect of the first commandment, which is: having no other gods before God bears witness to the pleasure of worshiping and praising the One True God and God alone. And that can only happen if we make one more truth claim. It is this: For all the claims we make, God has already claimed us and in Christ, God lives and shines through us and our trust is in the truths of God's daily care and provision to and for each of us.

Amen.