

I

Shortly after World War II, a young veteran enrolled at the University of Texas, where he met and fell in love with a young woman. They soon married and had four children, who in turn gave them seven grandchildren. The smartest and most handsome of their grandchildren has the privilege of preaching this morning at the First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia, but if it wasn't for the University of Texas, I wouldn't be standing here today.

I hate to bring up a sore subject, but as most of you fine folks here in Athens know, the mascot of the University of Texas is a longhorn steer named Bevo, and as you may recall, just before the kick off of last year's Sugar Bowl, Bevo and Uga got into a bit of a scuffle, which apparently was a foreshadowing of things to come.

This summer, we are working our way through a sermon series on The Ten Commandments, and we're learning a memorization technique using our ten fingers. Today we come to the second commandment, so here's your memory cue. Take your index finger and your pinky finger and make the sign for Hook 'Em Horns. Now, if you like, emphatically point those horns down toward the floor. The second commandment is, "You shall not make for yourself an idol."

But as you may know, if you read a little further ahead in the Book of

Exodus, Moses hadn't even come down from Mt. Sinai yet and the people of God were already worshiping a golden calf, which, in my imagination, looked remarkably like a burnt orange Bevo figurine. So the two fingers, made into the horns and pointed down, remind us of the second commandment, "You shall not make for yourself an idol."

Let's review what we've covered so far, shall we? Put your index finger in the air, and notice it looks like both the number one and the letter I. The first commandment is, "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me."

And then the second commandment, with the horns down. You shall not make for yourself an idol.

II

Now, this might sound a little silly to our modern ears. OK, don't go to the woodshop or the pottery studio and make a little bird or a little fish or a little orange steer and worship it as a god, and check, I'm good to go on the second commandment, right?

And why is God so worked up about this that God threatens to punishment for our children's children's children if we break this commandment?

Perhaps it will help if we step back a bit and take a wider perspective on world history. The ancient Israelites, to whom these ten commandments were first addressed, and to whom we trace

the ancestry of our faith through Jesus of Nazareth, were strange when compared to their ancient neighbors, because they practiced a form of religion called monotheism – which literally means one God.

All of our ancestors' neighbors practiced polytheism – the worship of many gods. The Canaanites, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans – they all practiced polytheism.

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning, when the Apostle Paul visited another Athens about 2,000 years ago, he saw that the ancient Greek capital was full of shrines and temples to all kinds of gods. Maybe you remember learning about them in school – Zeus and Aires and Athena and such. By the time Paul came to town, the Athenians had built so many shrines and temples that they had forgotten which shrine went with which god, so they just made a catchall and labeled it the shrine to the unknown god.

When we step back and take a longer view of world history, we notice that for a very long time, the vast majority of the world's population practiced polytheism – the worship of many gods.

And that's important to understand, because the ten commandments didn't just drop out of the sky and land with a thud on the courthouse lawn. They emerged as part

of a historical context, and as part of the larger story of God's calling and redemption of God's people.

When we come to our story in Exodus this morning, for hundreds of years, God's people have been living in the land of Egypt – first as welcomed and valued immigrants and refugees, and then, when Pharaoh found it to be politically expedient, he threatened their children and made them into slaves.

But God is up to something. God is on a mission to transform these former slaves and refugees into a holy nation, a royal priesthood, God's chosen, beloved people – and the ten commandments are the framework around which God is going to build this beloved community.

During all those years in Egypt, God's people couldn't help but notice that when their Egyptians neighbors needed rain for the harvest, they would scurry to the temple of Osiris, the goddess of the Nile flood. When the Egyptians needed victory in battle, they would scurry to the temple of Seth, the god of war. When the economy was starting to show signs of weakening, they would scurry to the temple of Ptah, the god of commerce.

Anytime the Egyptians had a need, anytime they were experiencing the slightest bit of anxiety or discomfort, well, there's an app, or rather, a god for that.

And by the time the Greeks came around, if there wasn't a god custom-built to serve your needs, just head on over to the temple to the unknown god and make your own.

Do you see the problem yet? We learn in the creation story that God made humankind in God's own image. And yet we have this nasty human tendency to keep trying to make gods in our own image, to suit our own purposes, to drive our own agendas.

It took God only half a minute to get God's people out of Egypt. Splitting the Red Sea, bringing the people through on dry land, that was parlor tricks for God. The hard part to this very day is getting the Egypt out the people of God.

III

Here in Athens, Georgia, I have yet to come across a temple to an unknown god. But we don't need one, because as our ancestor John Calvin once noted, the human heart is a factory of idols.

When we are frightened, when we are angry, when we are bored, how quickly we turn our gaze to the work of our hands, rather than to the Lord our God who brought us up out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. How quick we are to fashion gods in our own image, custom-tailored to suit our own agendas, to baptize our own

preconceived worldviews, to soothe our own anxieties.

As writer and Presbyterian Anne Lamott notes, if God hates all the same people and things that you do, you can be pretty sure you've made God in your own image, rather than the other way around.

When I was a chaplain at Grady Memorial Hospital, I met a young man once, who, if we had met under different circumstances, we would have been friends. He was about my age, and once had a profitable construction business, a wife, and a young child.

But during a moment of great pain and anxiety in his life, he turned to a false god called narcotics. And in his own words, he smoked his way through his home, through his business, through his tools, through his marriage, through his relationship with his child, through his standing in the community.

He was from another state, and so I asked him how he ended up in Atlanta. He said he wasn't really sure. He was so filthy and dirty and hungry that some kind person had pity on him and gave him a ten-dollar bill. He went into the local store fully intending to buy food. But he said that before he knew what was happening, he bought a bottle, went behind the store, drank the whole thing, passed out, and woke up in the hospital.

The addiction had become his god. It ruled his life. It enslaved him, and it led him to destruction. We don't need temples to an unknown god, because they're everywhere around us.

IV

And according to the text, Lord our God is a jealous God.

Last month, I had the opportunity to attend the Montreat Worship and Music Conference. And I noticed how many words there are in our hymnals and sacred music that describe God. We sang songs that proclaimed that God is wonderful and marvelous. We sang songs that proclaimed that God is righteous and just. We even sang a song that described God as terrible, not in the sense that God is bad, but in the sense that God is powerful and dangerous.

But to my knowledge, I've never come across a hymn or a piece of music that speaks of God as jealous. But it's right there in the text. I the Lord your God am a jealous God.

It strikes me that jealousy and love are interrelated emotions. If you don't love someone, then you'll never have cause to be jealous for them.

And that's the remarkable claim that God makes in this commandment. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. God is the creator of all that is, seen and unseen, the maker of everything that is above

and on and under the earth. As the old hymn says, God is immortal, invisible, God only is wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessed most glorious most ancient of days, almighty, victorious, worthy of praise...and jealous for you.

God is jealous for you, my sister, not because of anything you've done or not done, but because of who God is. God is jealous for you, my brother, not because of who you are or who your family is, but because of who God is. God is determined to be in relationship with you, so much so that God is willing to become flesh for you, to live for you, to go to the cross for you, to die for you, to be raised for you, to pray for you, to be so vulnerably in love with you as to even be jealous for you.

V

So may we remember who and whose we are, friends. May we remember how deeply, how fiercely, how passionately God loves us. May we remember that we were made in the image of God, and not the other way around.

May we remember that the God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

And may we remember that when
we look in the face of another human
being, whether that face presents as
male or female, brown or black, straight
or gay, Christian or Muslim,
conservative or liberal, when we look
into the face of another human being,
we are looking at the very image of God.

Amen.