

Graven Images and Bad Photos

Rob Gieselmann, Lent 3B, 2015

8 March 2015

I hate having my picture taken. Actually, I hate posing. Any time my mother is around, she insists on taking multiple pictures, lining her adult children up like a bunch of five year olds. God only knows who she shows these pictures to – “*Aren’t my sweet 50-something children adorable?*” So cute and cuddly.

This is the age of the photograph. Candid shots, stills, videos, skype; Even President Obama takes selfies – Then there are the websites: snapchat, pinterest, instagram. Who looks at all these pictures, anyway?

I don’t think I’ve ever driven across the Golden Gate Bridge when I didn’t see someone taking pictures. And I’m not sure I understand why. You can find perfectly exquisite photo of the bridge or the bay or San Francisco – online, for free. Do these tourists think they can do better? Or do they take pictures for the memory? Even so, I have to ask - What actual memory of the bridge could a person possibly have if all they’ve done on the bridge is take pictures.

I recently asked Tilly, my daughter, *whatever will you do with all the pictures you’ve taken?* She just rolled her **teenager** eyes at me, and said, *Dad*.

Author Teddy Wayne recently wrote a column for The New York Times, in which he claimed that photographs actually *replace* your memory of an event. Years later, by the time you’ve looked at the picture a dozen times, your memory is of the photo, not of the bridge. The photo stands between you and your experience. Moreover, by the time you’ve taken a picture, the event you’re memorializing has already passed. For example: you’re having a great time at the family reunion, so you decide to capture it on film. You gather everybody together for the photograph – but when you do that, everyone stops what they’re doing – effectively ending or pausing the very event you hope to capture. You’re left with only a photograph.

Remember the old song, *What’ll I do with just a photograph to tell my troubles to?* Again, the photo stands between you and your experience.

**

Patty and Dave Young asked me to meet with Jim’s – their son’s – Cub Scout troop on Tuesdays this winter, to help the boys earn their God and Family Merit Badge. This past week, the boys learned the Ten Commandments. I went through the big ten –a/k/a Ten Words - with them, commandment by commandment – Keep the Sabbath holy. Shalt not steal. We were rocking along pretty well – but I *knew* that the *no adultery (contract clause)* was about to come-up. The Scarlet Letter. The Big A. In my mind, I decided that *less* information would be better, so I planned to say something like, *adultery happens when a*

person is disloyal to another person. But before I said anything, I teased the parents. *Bet you're a little worried about how I'm going to explain adultery to your kids.* No sooner had I said this than one of the boys jumped up and said, *I know what adultery is. It's when a man cheats on his wife.*

Rules. The point of the exercise was to talk about rules. So we talked about rules, family and societal. One of the parents asked the boys, *which of your family's rules do you like, and which do you dislike?* Of-course it doesn't actually matter whether you like a rule – it is a rule. Rules help communities maintain order...Create necessary boundaries...And – facilitate loving relationships.

We've all observed seen that family without rules or boundaries: their kids run crazy through Safeway pulling candy off of shelves, begging their parents to buy something for them. These parents give in, and I can tell you, their children will grow-up feeling lost – because children without boundaries, do not feel safe. Reasonably enforced rules are like a fence to a horse - it is security.

But of-course, some rules were (as they say) made to be broken. Jesus broke the rules when he threw the money-changers out of the Temple. The money-changers were acting lawfully, providing a necessary service to worshippers. But they were also loud, and boisterous, and turned the holy Temple of God into a middle-eastern marketplace. Violating, in the end, the very principle on which the rule was based: to facilitate worship, not inhibit it.

He flouted other rules, too, healing people on the Sabbath – because, the Sabbath, he said, was made for people, and not people for the Sabbath. Jesus also obeyed rules; he paid the Temple tax, and at one point claimed that he came to fulfill the law, not destroy it. Jesus saw through to what was really going on – and the spirit of the rule.

It is no surprised, then, that Jesus crafted a whip using the inscrutable anger of God – God will throw anybody out who persists in hurting others. Money-changers included. Which is why rules matter – good rules keep people from hurting other people. The prohibition against adultery exists because adultery hurts others. Stealing, and murder, too. Even coveting – when people hold onto material goods so tightly they can't see and help others in need around them.

One of the parents sitting around the table with the boy scouts wryly observed, *coveting your neighbor's house is the Tiburon sin.* Think about it.

Did you know that the first of the Ten Commandments is not actually a commandment? *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery in Egypt.* That's all there is to it. It doesn't command a thing. Just, *I am the Lord your God.* But – the meaning behind this rule or so-called commandment is everything – Because it speaks to relationship...Without intermediary. I am the Lord **your God. Not somebody else's. This is personal, and your God crafted you with care,

knew you in your mother's womb. You perhaps thought it was all an accident, but it wasn't. Your God. And what follows is equally personal. No graven images, no gods before this one. The thing about a photograph is this: it is an image. It is not the experience. The photo fails you completely when it supplants the experience. *Becomes* the memory.

Likewise, it is too easy to let the mere idea of God supplant the experience of God. No graven images, no photographs, because – your God wants experience with you. Today... Now... *Taste and see that the Lord is Good.*