

April 3, 2019 – Exodus 20:1-17 & Hebrews 9:18-24

When you think of virtues, what comes to mind? Maybe the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Maybe some of the beatitudes: meekness, a thirst for righteousness, mercy, purity, peacemaking. These certainly are at the forefront of my mind.

But there's one characteristic we would never normally list as a virtue: jealousy. No one in their right mind thinks of jealousy as a virtue. As a good thing. As a godly characteristics.

This past Sunday, for example, I talked about the tragedies of Shakespeare. And what was one of the most famous of those tragedies? Othello. A story in which virtually every character ends up dead because of jealousy. Certainly, jealousy must be a bad thing in every situation.

And yet, it's not. Our Old Testament lesson proves it's not. Because it's a characteristic of God himself. God is jealous. He boldly, bluntly proclaims it in the midst of the First Commandment.

*"I the Lord your God am a jealous God,"* he says. And not only does he feel jealousy, he acts on it too. Violently. He visits the iniquity of a father onto his children to the third and fourth generation. This is sounding more and more like Othello. Like a tragedy in the making.

But it's not. And to understand that, we have to understand what it means to be jealous. Which is actually harder to do than you might expect. Psychologists have tried for years to develop a standard, scientific definition of jealousy. Open a dictionary and you mostly get a list of words that are rough synonyms of jealousy, but without much description.

One of the best ways to understand jealousy, though, is to go back to how the word originated. It's etymology, to use the technical term. And, as it turns out, the word "jealous" and the word "zealous" have the same root.

And now we're getting into an important aspect of jealousy that you might not have considered. Jealousy is being zealous for someone or something. About being passionately interested in them. Intensely devoted to them. To the exclusion of everything else.

Which can be a good thing or a bad thing. One of Jesus' disciples was known as Simon the Zealot. He was part of a group of people who were passionately devoted to freeing the Jews from Roman rule. To the point of rioting, rebellion, and committing acts of murder. In modern day terms, they were terrorists. But their acts of violence, which were certainly bad, came out of a zealous devotion to their Lord, which is generally a good thing.

God is zealous for His people. From the day he turned to the serpent in the garden and said, "I will crush your head for what you have done," he has shown a zealous passion for us. And that devotion became even more pronounced after He went to Abraham and said, "I am choosing you and your family as my people."

From that point on, God's singular focus was upon the people of Israel. He became a zealot for the descendants of Abraham. They were his one and only consideration.

And so when it came time to bring them out of Egypt, he didn't care how many plagues he had to rain down on the Egyptians to free his people. Kill their crops with a plague of locusts and hail. Done. Kill their livestock with pestilence and boils. Done. Kill their firstborn children and all their armies. Done.

Generally speaking, the Lord is a God of life and creation. He does not like to kill. But he is a jealous God. He is a zealous God. And he will not let anyone hurt those he loves.

So that explains one facet of jealousy. But it doesn't explain all of it. And, in particular, it doesn't fully explain what God's jealousy has to do with the giving of these commandments.

Because jealousy can be looked at from another angle: as a fear of loss. As a desire to keep and protect that which is ours. As a hostility for anyone or anything that would take our beloved away.

And so God speaks to Moses on Mount Sinai and gives these Ten Commandments and says, "Look, you know how zealous I am for my people. I brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because of that passionate devotion. I did whatever was necessary to free you. But the Egyptians aren't the only things that can take you away from me."

Idolatry can take us away from the Lord. Blasphemy can take us away from the Lord. Abandoning the preaching of God's Word can take us away from the Lord. A failure to honor and respect our parents can take us away from the Lord. Murder, adultery, and theft can take us away from the Lord. Lies and infighting can take us away from the Lord. A lack of contentment can take us away from the Lord.

Simply put, sin can take us away from the Lord. Sin drives a wedge between God and his people. Sin tempts us away from all the good that God has for us. Sin enslaves and binds us. And, ultimately, sin drags us to hell itself.

God is jealous for his people. He does not want to see us taken from him. He does not want to see us bound in the desires of the flesh. He does not want to see us perish eternally.

And in that jealousy, he will do anything to keep us. Anything to protect us. He will condemn and destroy anything that will take us away from him.

So yes, he will visit the iniquity of a father onto his children to the third and fourth generation... of those who who hate him. If they hate the Lord, then they are not someone he wants around his people. If they hate the Lord then they will inevitably lead us away from him.

But that jealousy is only born out of his great love for us. A steadfast love to thousands of those who love him and keep his commandments. Commandments he gives out of love. Commandments he gives because he does not want to see us come to harm.

God is jealous for us. And yet, I don't think it's accurate to say that he fears he will lose us. That's a characteristic of human jealousy. It's a characteristic that results from insecurity. From weakness. From limitation. We experience fear only because we don't know everything. We don't control everything.

That kind of fear doesn't apply to God. God doesn't fear losing us because he knows exactly what it takes to keep us. He knew what it would take to break Pharaoh and free his people from Egypt. He knew what it would take to lead his people through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. He knew what it would take to conquer Canaan and make his people the great nation that he had promised to Abraham.

But most of all, he knew exactly what it would take to free us from our sin. He knew it would take the shedding of blood. As our epistle says, *"under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins."*

God gave us the Law because he is a jealous God. Because he cannot stand the thought of losing his people to sin, death, and the devil. Because he wants to warn us whenever we stray from him.

But, the truth is, we were already separated from God before the Ten Commandments. We were separated from God all the way back in the Garden of Eden. And because of that separation, and because God has always been a jealous God, he knew all the way back then that blood would need to be shed. That in order for the serpent's head to be crushed, his Son's heel would be bruised.

It would take the shedding of blood far more precious than that of calves and goats. It would take the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. And it would need to be sprinkled on far more than just the Book of the Law and the people of Israel. It would need to be sprinkled on the whole world.

The Lord is a jealous God. He is zealous for his people, passionate and devoted to our care. He will do anything to keep us. Anything to protect us. He will condemn and destroy anything that will take us away from him.

But he isn't afraid to lose us. Because of what Jesus did on the cross, no one can take us out of his hand. Nothing can separate us from his love.

Jealousy isn't normally a virtue. But when it comes to God, it most definitely is. Divine jealousy is what rescued Israel from Egypt. Divine jealousy is why Jesus went to the cross. Divine jealousy is why you are saved. Amen.