

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

519-683-2442 standrewspcdresden@gmail.com Rev. Andy Cornell

Worship This Week Sept. 7, 2025

SCRIPTURE – Exodus 20:4-6

“You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. 5 You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. 6 But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands.

MESSAGE – Last week, we looked at the command not to have other gods but the Lord: “no other gods but me.” We can take it literally, like they did when this was written, when people of all faiths, even Jews, recognized several gods. Or we can understand this as not replacing God with a philosophy of life and what we value or what we fill our lives with: image, wealth or power. We are commanded to make God the most important thing in life – more than our work and interests, more than family, more than ourselves.

This second commandment goes a step further and forbids the worship of any representation of the true God. The first two commandments are so closely related that the Roman Catholic church combines them into one. (They divide the final commandment not to covet into two parts to make up for it and allow them still to have 10.) The Catholic approach is fine; I don't believe it goes against the spirit of the commands. If we take them to heart as one or two does not matter. But for our purposes, we will treat them as separate, which is a good thing because of their importance.

Two specific things are prohibited in this command: an idol and an image. An idol of God, strictly speaking, would be a statue or figure of the Divine. For example, Buddhists worship a small figure of the Buddha. Yes, we have the cross, but that is a symbol. We don't (or must not) worship the cross itself. An image would be a painting or image of what God would look like. To many many people in the church, that's understood as God the Father or The Holy Spirit. As for Jesus, that's OK because He actually came to earth and lived in a human body. People in Jesus' day worshipped Him and the Lord had no problem with that. So an image of Christ is OK in their minds.

Over all, the argument in favour of having crosses and images of Jesus boils down to what you are worshipping. Is it the idol, statue, figurine that is the object of worship? Or is it the person of the Trinity (Father, Son or Holy Spirit) that it represents? Truth be told, I take a literal meaning from this commandment. Call it hardline, if you wish.

I am OK with the cross, because it's not an idol. The cross is a symbol of a tool of execution. It is a reminder of how we are so under the spell of Satan that our ancestors did not recognize the Son of God in their midst. I sometimes wonder if we would recognize Him today – but that's a matter for another message.) In that light, the cross is the opposite of an idol. The cross is more than a reminder of our sinful state. It is a reminder of what Jesus was willing to endure to die for my sins. In churches of our tradition, the cross is empty because Jesus did not spend much time on it. He was taken down after He died, placed in a tomb and on the third day, He returned to life. He is risen from the dead and lives today in the hearts and minds of all who believe.

Paintings or sketches of Jesus are a different matter. I believe they cross the line and are a violation of the command not to have “an image of anything in the heavens.” I did not always think like this. As a child, I was comforted by the image of Jesus that hung in every Sunday School classroom and in the entrances to many churches. Jesus loves the little children. Jesus is love. Jesus died for me and is waiting for me in heaven. Jesus is a good man, the kind of person we all must strive to be. In the same way that we look up to our parents and grandparents and remember them by looking at their photos, we do the same with that image of Jesus.

There's a few things wrong with this. First is that this well-known image was created to appeal to white North American consumers. The artist worked in the advertising industry. The portrait was commissioned for a book publisher. This image of Jesus is what people WANTED to see rather than what He really looked like. Bottom line: it's more about us than about God.

The Bible does not provide any description of what Jesus looked like. The authors of the Gospels provide details on his teaching and the reactions of the people, but nothing on how he appeared. We know more about John the Baptist's appearance. Matthew and Mark say “John's clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist” (Matthew 3.4, Mark 1:6). The closest description we have of the Lord is in Isaiah, who prophesied on the Messiah: “My servant grew up in the LORD's presence like a tender green shoot, like a root in dry

ground. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him.”

Images of Jesus are as old as Christianity. They have changed over the centuries. Often, the images were a reflection of a particular culture. It’s human nature to surround ourselves with others who are like us. And if Jesus is so important, then the images will be comforting. I believe it is reasonable to assume that if Jesus was like other first century male Jews, he was brown-skinned, with dark hair and brown eyes. According to Jewish practices of the time, it is likely Jesus had short hair.

Even with that knowledge, no one can declare with confidence what Jesus actually looked like. So why bother? I have to ask, why is it so important to create a human face to represent the Son of God? If we are honest, we will admit that we are not doing it for God. We are doing it for ourselves. We are like those Sunday School children from the 1940s, 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s who were comforted by the image of someone who spoke to their peace and assurance and place in the world.

If it’s about us, then it obviously is not about God. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit cannot be summed up in an image. To do so puts limits on them. The Holy Spirit is represented by a dove, a symbol of peace. But that is only a small part of what the Spirit does. The prohibition of any image of God is so clear. I find it amazing that throughout history we did not see that. Our inability to see is not much different from the disciples, who could not even see the face of God right in front of them.

The bottom line is that when God specifically said no to idols and images, the reason was because He wanted us to get to know him in the heart. That’s what God wants. The second commandment is an invitation to come close to God. Allow His Spirit to fill your heart, to inspire your thinking, to fill your body from head to toe with peace. Don’t worship his portrait. Worship Him in Spirit, worship Him in what He has done, is doing and promises to do. Any attempt to create an image is only going to limit God. The image itself is going to invite division.

The second part of this command is a warning to those who refuse to follow it. “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. 6 But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands.”

The word “jealous” is worth considering. We can understand it the way we act in regard to our children and loved ones. Jealousy is about protecting something. We are jealous of our spouses because we do not want to share them with others. Imagine someone is showing interest in your spouse that appears to be crossing the line. It’s happened to all of us. What do you feel when you observe what’s happening? What emotions are you experiencing? Our reaction is to step in. We will not tolerate competition. God is the same. Why the jealousy? Because He wants us all for Himself. He knows that when we are on our own, we are sitting ducks. No warnings because you’re having a bad day or God happens to be in a good mood. This is zero tolerance. It is that important. When it’s life and death, that’s why we have zero tolerance. This is not something we can ignore or even downplay. Yes, God forgives. And yes, we will all fall into sin regarding the worship of things other than God. We will regularly put God in the backseat or even forget to bring him along for the journey. And when we realize that and repent, we will receive forgiveness. But that assurance does not mean we can continue to do it. God is so serious about this that He is willing to punish the offenders beyond their own lives and into generations which follow. In human eyes, that’s just not right. It’s revolting. It’s inhumane and unjust, and so on. But it is that important.

We can find comfort in the fact that God will “lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands.” Awesome – a thousand generations is simply too much for my human brain to take in. Might as well understand this as eternity. Contrast that with the penalty for the sins of the parents, which is a mere four or five generations. I am going to go out on a limb here and suggest that if someone adheres to these commandments and places them on their hearts, teaches them to their children and writes them on the walls of their homes and so on, they have nothing to fear. It’s the generations of people who have grown up with no Christian witness in their homes, families or friends that is tragic. Of course, they do not know what they are missing. But all it takes is one person to react to a witness and come to faith.

Again, the assurance for us is the immense joy and peace found in a relationship with Christ, infused with the power of the Holy Spirit and founded on the eternal promises of God the Father. Walk with Him, talk with Him. Know his teachings, know His ways. Worship the powerful mystery of the risen Christ who is eager to fill your heart and mind – and those of your friends and family – with peace and healing power. If that is the object of our worship, then the future is bright indeed. Amen.