

How to Live with a Jealous God

Deut. 5:6-10

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What does it mean for our God to be “jealous?” What an odd description printed right there in the Book of Deuteronomy. I mean this is *God* we are talking about. This is the One who has created so freely and masterfully -- from specks of space dust to the most mountainous terrains, from a newborn’s first breath to a mature mind’s wisdom, from drops of dew to wall-high waves. This is *God*, who exhibited such mighty, merciful power and lavish love in Jesus Christ. Why would *God* be jealous of anything or anyone?

This is *also* the One depicted in this morning’s passage of the first two of the great Ten Commandments described as “punishing” children for the “iniquity,” that is, the “sins,” of their parents and their parent’s parents. Jealousy is the reason given for this punishment. This business about jealousy, as I see it, needs some serious attention and careful interpretation.

In re-reading the text this week I have to tell you I had some serious trouble accepting the concept of children being punished for the sins of their parents and grandparents. Punishing us for the sins of previous generations? Doesn’t this sound more than a bit vindictive, as if God chooses to “get even” with the sins of great-grandpa Joe by inflicting a punishment on newborn Joseph the Fourth? If this be as true as it seems at first glance, then given some of my family history I’m in a heap of trouble. God being jealous is difficult enough to grasp, let alone jealous and looking to even the score.

When wrestling deeply with the Word of God like this, it’s always a very good idea to do a little in-depth word study. So I first visited the Hebrew word which the New Revised Standard Version (which is in our pews) translates as “punishment.” And, to my relief, I found myself disagreeing with the decision rendered by translators of the NRSV, which is otherwise my translation of choice. The word is pronounced “pah-qad” and yes, part of its meaning is “to punish.” But to the best of my understanding, it is not a word bent toward vindictiveness. It also and I believe more fully means “to pay attention to” and “to lay a charge upon.” So, as I further interpret it, Deuteronomy 5:9 can read more like “I the Lord your God am a jealous God, *paying attention to* and holding parents to the third and fourth generation *accountable for* all the ways I’ve been rejected in sin.”

I believe this word study is important to our understanding of “jealous” as a description of God. If we read Deuteronomy 5:9 and hear it as God’s going to even the score, then God’s jealousy does appear petty and vindictive. This is not a word of hope. It is not safe harbor for

our souls. It's not a comfortable thought for any of us trying to live faithfully and with love, not to mention in ways radically different from some of our family members.

But if we read this and hear this as meaning our families, from generation to generation, are being held accountable for any and all ways God has been rejected, then the onus falls much more closely on examining our behavior, doesn't it? The mood shifts from being afraid of God to being afraid of the consequences of allowing ourselves and our children and our grandchildren to reject, to sin against, God.

Even more importantly, it sets the table for our understanding the distinction between being jealous *of* and being jealous *for*. To be jealous *of* is to be envious. And envy can lead to all kinds of retributive thoughts and actions. To be jealous *for*, on the other hand, is more akin to being vigilantly protective and possessive. Biblically speaking, the overall depiction of God is that of being jealous *for* us. God made us and loves us and is ever attentive to us, right? And God, as all the Scriptures bear witness to, is never content to let us miss out on or flat our reject this fact. God jealously guards against anything and everything that gets in the way of our grasping this with our whole heart and mind and soul. As one biblical scholar put is, being jealous *of* "is tantamount to envy and is NEVER ascribed to God," and being "jealous *for* "is essentially the same in meaning as *zealous for protecting/maintaining our enjoyable and fruitful relationship of intimacy*".

The root of the Hebrew word for "jealous," by the way, means to get very red in the face. This, of course, can mean flustered as well as embarrassed. So, the first two of the Ten Commandments teach us that God gets very red in the face – angry in a parentally protective, loving way and perhaps even embarrassed – when we turn away and worship other gods. Do any of us really want to worship a god who doesn't care if we betray the divine intimacy freely offered to us? I feel better believing that God is deeply passionate about being in relationship with me, with you, with the world. I feel better knowing God wants to guard against any and all inclinations of intimate betrayal.

How, then, are we to best live with this jealous God? With our God who loves us with such fierce passion? Let's now consider two practical and related directives of these first two of the Ten Commandments.

First, we must never forget the Good News of what God has done for us. For the Israelites, this meant, above all, the deliverance from slavery in Egypt en route to the Promised Land. This was the core, common experience held near and dear and celebrated with great reverence generation to generation. This deliverance from oppression in fulfillment of a divine promise was the defining moment in their common narrative of faith. It was truly their identity.

For Christians, we must never forget the work of forgiveness and reconciliation

accomplished for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is our exodus, our exodus from enslavement to sin under the personal, in-the-flesh direction of God Almighty. The path to the heavenly Promised Land is open to us and to our children and to our children's children and for every generation to come, through the mighty love that was nailed to a crude Roman Cross. "In the cross," wrote Thomas A Kempis back around the fifteenth century, "is health, in the cross is life, in the cross is protection from enemies, in the cross is heavenly sweetness, in the cross strength of mind, in the cross joy of the Spirit, in the cross the height of virtue, in the cross perfection of holiness. There is no health of the soul, no hope of eternal life, save in the cross." With such strong sentiment, it is no wonder this author of the classic devotional The Imitation of Christ has a German family name meaning "little hammer."

Bring this home to your heart. What are your most divinely defining moments? Those times when you felt most loved and upheld and delivered by God? Those times of immense clarity about what being saved from the dis-ease of sin is really about? Whatever your answer, hold fast to it. Never forget about what God has done for you.

Secondly, given how God has graciously gifted us with redemption, we must stop worshipping our idols. Back in the days of the Old Testament, idols were most commonly small wooden figurines carved to represent specific deities. If you were to carve a small wooden depiction of your idols, your false gods, those things you sometimes (or often times) place a deep trust in before turning to the Lord our God, what would they look like? You might find yourself carving ... well, carving a little tiki of yourself. Or it could be of your credit card. I trust some things are coming to mind.

Every time our intimacy toward God wanes by our not remembering what God has done for us and by our worshipping idols, divine jealousy is sparked. If you truly want to live with this jealous God we are gathered here to worship this morning, pay close mind to the Ten Commandments and to the entire testimony of the Scriptures. They are intended, preached Martin Luther, "to help the heart come to itself and grow zealous in prayer."

Last month, as I've been mentioning to many of you recently, I began a two-year training program in spiritual direction through Oasis Ministries of Camp Hill, PA. I did so for professional, but much more so for personal reasons. After nine full, fun, faithful, and challenging years of ordained ministry, the practice of spiritual direction is how I'm most choosing to live with my jealous God. Spiritual Direction is about living contemplatively with God, which, as I've come to define it, means living completely attentive to God. To do so requires discipline that comes in the form of various prayer practices and lifestyle choices. My training in this field will enable me to help any and all of you arrive at a "deeper" awareness of your Lord's relationship with you. It is a process akin to counseling, yet firmly centered in

Christian devotion. I meet monthly with my spiritual director. She has a well trained way of listening to my life and listening for God's presence in my life that helps me sort out the moments when I allow my God-consciousness to slip to the backburner of my awareness and when I choose to cook for false idols instead. It's all about spiritual intimacy, and I am so very grateful to be part of it both as directee and director. Should any of you have an interest in meeting with me for spiritual direction, please don't hesitate to ask.

My family of faith here at Fairmount, God *is* jealous *for* you. And this is tremendously good news. God is not ever going to be content to passively and in a passionless way be ignored or betrayed. All that agony on the Cross of Christ built up ardent love, and it is ours to live with daily. God's jealousy is a deep bonfire within our souls. It's the deep red face of the sunrise and sunset. Pray we not ignore it; pray we enjoy it!

Amen.