

Choose Love

By Keith E Gatling

Message for October 15, 2008

2 Samuel 11: 1-5

As a kid I heard the 10 Commandments roughly once a month. That's because in the Episcopal Church, they were a regular part of the Communion liturgy.

And for the most part, I knew what they meant. There was no question about "Thou shalt not steal." You'd have to be brain dead not to get that one immediately.

"Thou shalt do no murder" was a little more subtle. It's not the more commonly paraphrased and understood "thou shalt not kill." No, this implied that murder was a specific type of killing that wasn't allowed, and that some of the others might just be justified from time to time.

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" was another no-brainer. But there were two that I just didn't get, and that's because the words weren't in my already quite impressive vocabulary: "Thou shalt not covet" and "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

Now I know what you're probably thinking, "Keith, you're a smart guy, and were obviously a smart kid, so why didn't you just go look the words up?"

I did. But I'm convinced that back in 1968 there was a conspiracy between the writers of dictionaries and our parents to make the definitions to some words they didn't want us to know totally indecipherable.

I remember, after my parents wouldn't tell me what "illegitimate" meant because it

"wasn't a word little boys needed to know" (and they'll deny that they ever did this), looking it up in the dictionary, and being greeted with a definition of "born out of wedlock." OK, so just what does that mean? Perfectly obvious to a set of 38 and 42 year old parents, perfectly obvious to me now, but perfectly obscure to your basic 12 year old. And the more I tried to find the definitions of the other words, the more confused I got. I sort of had an idea of what it might mean, but I didn't know for sure.

Nowadays a dictionary would simply define it as "born of parents who are not married to each other." That's what it said at Dictionary.com. It also gave the old 1968 definition of "Born out of wedlock."

So anyway, I didn't know what covet or adultery meant for a long time, even though I heard those words about once a month.

What does this have to do with anything? A lot. Those two words I didn't know the meanings of have everything to do with what I want to talk about tonight. Because now I know what they mean.

I suspect that most you know what adultery is, but in case you don't, I'll fill you in. It's sex between two people where at least one of them is married to someone else. In other words, the stuff that soap operas, oh, excuse me, daytime dramas, are made of.

Coveting is still a little tough for most of us. In his book The Year of Living Biblically, AJ Jacobs gets a definition along the lines of wanting something that is someone else's. I can't quote it exactly for you, because I have the audiobook, and it's a little hard to look up passages that way. He then goes on to say that this means that it's wrong for him to covet the \$15,000 speaking fee that some other writer got.

Um...I don't think so. I think he got an overly simplistic answer. My working definition of coveting is not simply wanting something that is someone else's, but wanting that particular one, to the point of wanting to take it from the other person. Jacobs may have been envious of that other writer, but he didn't want to have the fee instead that guy; he wanted to have one like it. He wanted to have one too. And that, in my book, is not coveting.

When you covet something you want what is someone else's for your own. You don't want one like it. You don't want one too. You want that particular one that he or she has.

And this finally brings us to David and Bathsheba. Did he really love her, or was it just a case of raging hormones. What was the cause of the adultery he was about to engage in? Did he covet her?

You know, up to the point where I started to put this on paper, I had simply accepted the conventional wisdom that David coveted Bathsheba. He wanted what Uriah had, to the point of wanting Bathsheba to be his rather than Uriah's. But on closer examination, I see something different. David was cool. He didn't want her all to himself. He was willing to share - as long as Uriah didn't know about it. The problem

came when Bathsheba became pregnant, and there was no way for David to cover up his tracks.

But wait a second. I checked Dictionary.com for their definition of "covet," and it reads "to desire...without due regard for the rights of other." OK, so I guess David did covet Bathsheba, despite being willing to "share."

I have a number of "girlfriends" at school. Really. There are a number of teachers at MPH that I have serious crushes on, and not only does Cheryl know about every single one of them, but she also considers them good choices for me. Now before you people get all scandalized about this, I recently read an article that says that one of the reasons we flirt is "insurance." We're looking to see who else out there might be suitable for us if something tragic happened to our current spouse. That makes absolutely perfect sense to me, and should relieve a lot of people of a whole lot of unnecessary guilt.

Anyway, I understand that under the current rules, or at least the rules as we currently understand them (and let's admit that our understanding of the rules has changed over the years), I can't "go there" with any of my "girlfriends." Heck, it's not even safe for me to let them know that I like them - although they might suspect it already.

Not only that, but because of how much I love Cheryl, I can understand how much each of my "girlfriends" love their husbands, and wouldn't want anything to get in the way of that.

In short, based on both my original understanding of the word and the one from Dictionary.com, I don't covet them. But, if I

care enough about them to not want to destroy what they have for my own benefit, does this, ironically, upgrade my simply "liking" them to actually loving them, because I'm showing love for them in how I act?

But let's finish the story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah.

When he realizes that she's pregnant, David sends for Uriah to come home from battle to spend some "quality time" with his wife, so that everyone will think that she's pregnant with Uriah's child. But Uriah refuses, because of duty, and left with no other way to cover things up; David plots with the other officers to arrange for Uriah to die in battle, which brings us to murder, one of the commandments that I clearly understand.

At this point, despite what I said earlier, David is no longer cool about this.

Nathan the prophet comes and confronts David about this with his parable about the man with many sheep who has guests coming over for dinner, and who, instead of serving one of his own, steals the only sheep his neighbor owns, and serves that for dinner.

Traditionally, we've looked at Bathsheba as being the sheep stolen from Uriah, but as I was thinking about this lesson, another thought occurred to me - that Uriah was the sheep stolen from Bathsheba.

In this whole story, I don't think it could be said at any time, that David acted with true love toward Bathsheba. But his desire, which turned into covetousness also, led to abuses of power and murder.

He acted without due regard for the rights of either Bathsheba or Uriah, and as such, it was definitely not about love. At least not the way I understand it should be.

It wouldn't have been wrong for David to like Bathsheba, for him to like her too. But how he acted on it was the problem. He didn't act out of love for her.

I guess nowadays the word we'd use to describe David's relationship with Bathsheba is "obsessed." Obsession often leads to covetousness, adultery, and the occasional restraining order. Love, on the other hand, can, ironically, lead you to walk away.

Once I understood the meaning of the word "covet," I used to joke with others about that particular commandment, saying, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor thy neighbor's ass, nor thy neighbor's wife's..." well you get the drift.

Now that you know what it is both to covet and to truly love, I hope you choose love.