# A Sermon Rev. Thomas V. Abbott 2/3/19

**"Put Nothing Before God"**

**Scripture Passages: 1) Deuteronomy 6:4-9**

**2) Matthew 22:34-40**

**3) Exodus 20:1-3, 18-21**

**Setting the Stage:** On several levels our lives are a repeating journey where we move from slavery to the Promised Land, a journey that always takes us through the wilderness. This journey begins when we recognize that we are enslaved in some manner. This journey begins when we groan to God, asking to be set free.

As humans we would like this process of being set free to be quick and painless. The Exodus story, the story of the Israelite people confirms, however, that the process of being set free is rarely quick and painless. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years. They wandered until almost everyone who had begun the journey had died. In other words, sometimes the process of being set free can take generations.

If we question the truth of that, all we have to do is ask our neighbors of Native American lineage, or our black neighbors who trace their genealogy through the slaves, or our neighbors who trace their lineage to the Chinese immigrants brought here to work the railroads, or our Japanese neighbors who were interred during World War II, or our Latino neighbors whose ancestors, like themselves have been working in our mines and our fields, our Hotels and Resorts, in construction and maintenance. We don’t have to look very far to see the truth that the journey from slavery to the Promised Land can be a long, difficult, even brutal journey that can take generations and generations.

If you come from a family where there was alcoholism, or sexual abuse, or physical abuse then you know that the journey from slavery to the Promised Land can take generations.

When we consider our own maturation as a human being, we realize that the journey from those aspects of our personalities that enslave us, to some place healthier, do not happen over night but can take years, decades, a life-time, and along the way we hope we are able to pass the wisdom we learn to our children, in a manner that will benefit them.

All of this maturation, becoming healthier as people, as families, as communities, as nations happens in the wilderness. The wilderness is the place of formation. The wilderness is the place where we are forged into God’s people. The wilderness is a place of unknown. The wilderness is a place of profound beauty, and unending challenge. The wilderness is a place of transformation. The wilderness is a place of healing, a place where love is birthed and nurtured. The wilderness is where God’s love was poured out through leading, guiding, miracles, provision, learning, testing, challenging, teaching, and of course the giving of the Ten Commandments.

When we consider the gift of the Ten Commandments, we realize that if we are going to mature as God’s people then order, spiritual practices, discipline will be a part of our lives. The Ten Commandments give us a framework for that order.

It seems to me that in our cultural context many of us struggle to trust that laws like the Ten Commandments are life giving. Our cultural context teaches us that laws are confining, hem us in, restrict creativity, and suck joy right out of our lives. No wonder we are leery of the Ten Commandments being a gift.

It really is a matter of trust. Do we trust that God knows better than we do, what is going to bring us life, health, and the freedom necessary to grow and mature? Can we trust that in following God’s wisdom for us, wisdom like the Ten Commandments that we will experience a more beautiful life, a healthier life, a maturing life?

**The Two Tablets:** During our life-times the Ten Commandments have been depicted as two stone tablets. The first tablet has the four commandments related to our God relationship and the second tablet has the six commandments related to our human relationships.

This of course, was exactly how Jesus talked about the commandments when asked about the greatest commandment. He said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This the greatest and the first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

**Putting God First:** In his statement, Jesus was talking about the two tablets of the commandments. Today we begin considering the first tablet. The Ten Commandments begin: **Read Exodus 20:1-3, 18-21.**

“No other gods, only me.” “You shall have no other gods before me.”

When we consider how we order our lives, Scripture is clear, our lives will be the healthiest, most beautiful, least complicated, not to mention life giving and healing to the world, when we put God first. That sounds easy, sensible, but we struggle to live this out. We struggle putting God first in our lives.

For me, the “god” that most often replaces God at the center of my life is each of you. (Pause) I am a people pleaser. I want people to like me. I want people to see me as competent. I want people to see me as a good leader. I don’t want to be in conflict with anyone. It is incredibly easy for me to put you before God.

Maybe you can relate to my situation, or maybe you think I am just wacky. My wackiness relates to my family system, my role in my family, the enmeshment of my family, and how I easily become enmeshed with others. For me I can easily replace God, as the central focus of my life with any person I wish would like me, for whatever reason I feel it would be good for that person to like me.

Leadership gurus, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky write, “Leadership is disappointing your own people at a rate they can absorb.” I believe there is great truth in that statement, but I don’t want to disappoint anyone. You are my “gods”. Don’t let that unfortunate reality go to your head, through

When I am able to embrace this reality about myself it frees me up to put my relationship with God before you, which is healthier and more beneficial for all of us, although we may question whether that is actually true. For both of us there are perks in me choosing to make you a “god”.

Now I have bared my soul to you. But the truth is that like me, you too have a “god” or “gods” that you tend to put before God, which then diminishes your ability to grow, to mature, to be a blessing to the world around you, to experience as beautiful a life as God intends for each of us.

**Loving God with All of Our Being:** Jesus said to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. In Deuteronomy we are challenged to love God with all our heart, soul, and might. These statements remind us that it takes every ounce of who we are, all working together, mind, heart, soul, with great determination if we are going to keep our God relationship before any other relationship, or situation, or thing in our lives.

The fact is we can turn anyone or anything into a “god” that we then put before “God”. Whenever we go down that road, we diminish our lives, the beauty of our lives, the health of our lives, the impact of our lives.

**Conclusion:** The healthiest choice we can make in our lives is to keep God as our God, which is not an easy path for us.

Today as we gather around our Lord’s Table, I hope each of us will take a deep look at our lives, an honest look at our lives, admitting who or what we tend to make as “god”, rather than God. Let us ask God, the only God to give us the determination, the strength, the might to keep our relationship with God as the central focus, each and every day. Amen.