

NO GRAVEN IMAGE

The other night I heard someone ask a group of 13 year olds, "What do you want to be when you grow up? – A doctor? A lawyer? Or what?" It was the usual, polite, stereotyped question. But 13 year olds are sometimes capable of surprising answers. Quick as a flash, one boy replied, "When I grow up, I want to be a person, a human being." And then, rather mumbling to himself, added, "I don't want to be a hippie, or a doctor, or what – I want to be a person, a human being."

That was a very sensitive and insightful reply – and right too. For the first and most important thing to be in this life is not "a hippie, or a doctor, or what." The first and most important thing to be is "a person" a "human being". It's quite possible to end up in one of the professions (though I had never thought of listing "hippie" among them) – and not be a real person. It is frighteningly possible to be a "successful" this or that, and be a failure as a human being.

So the 13-year-old was right, and in his own way, was phrasing one of Moses' Ten Commandments. After all, the commandments are not, as one young fellow once told me, "God's cat-o-nine-tails", they're not a whip over the head of the wayward to lash you into line. Rather they are guideposts, the Almighty saying, "Look here, go this way, if you want to avoid shipwreck – stay healthy, happy, or you want to be a real person, a true human being. And one of the soundest of these is the guidepost that says, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image". That's probably among the first steps toward staying truly alive, becoming a free person, a mature human being in God's sight. "You shall not make for yourself a graven image."

Most of us however, are like the marine trying to storm the pearly gates, who said to Saint Peter, with a chuckle, "Well, sir, at least I never made a graven image!"

Most of us do think of this as "the curious commandment", and the one sin in the book we don't commit. And yet, among all the Mosaic guideposts, it is likely where

we fail the most, the one place where we do fail most often to be fully human, as fully human as God knows we can be.

Oh yes, we're good at making "graven images". We are master craftsmen at it, in fact. And I don't mean in just the obvious sense of fashioning plain and fancy idols – "golden calves" – like the contemporary "drugs, sex, and money", and falling all over each other to "worship and adore" them – though we certainly do that with our slick paper magazines and mighty telly, we silly, middle-aged (all-aged) satirists that we are, prancing around new-found gods, pretending to be believing saints. But we're not talking about this sort of idolatry. We are all aware of this. Anyone knows you can make an idol out of most anything.

And the commandment, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image" goes much deeper. Let me explain: To this day, orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, picturesque as they are in their black hats and side curls, will not let you take their picture. If you try, they will piously hit you with a rock ("stoning", it's still called) – and rightly so – not because they think the law forbids photography – but because they do not wish to be caught, trapped, stamped, engraved by your camera and their image taken home as a stereotyped picture for your friends to "ooh and ahh" over – "O, look! – so picturesque, in their black caps and side curls!"

That is to say, it hurts to be caught in a stereotype. It hurts when someone says, "You wouldn't understand, you're a woman!" That hurts, if you're a woman. It hurts when someone says, "You preachers are all alike!" It hurts if you are one. It hurts when someone says, "You think just because you're so – well, whatever you are – rich, young, white, black". It hurts, I tell you, to be trapped, typed, put in a box, with thousands, (the "spittin" image), the very "graven image" of each other, with no chance for you to be your own person, a human being on your very own, free to be an intelligent woman, an honest banker, a good rich man, a responsible, hard working, kindly white man, black man, old man, young man or woman, or whatever in God's earth you are.

Haven't you any imagination? Hasn't anybody ever pigeon-holed you and wouldn't let you be yourself, even your best self, especially wouldn't let you be your best self, and all just because you were your father's son or daughter, or this or that? And didn't you want to be free to be yourself, and didn't it hurt when they wouldn't let you? Wouldn't let you out of the box – because you were stereotyped as a housewife, a banker, a student, a lawyer, an Indian chief? – Rather – I wanna be me!”

So don't you understand how God feels, why he didn't want to be made a graven image out of, why he didn't want to be made into the “likeness of anything in heaven above or earth beneath”? Because it hurt, that's why. It boxed God in, cut off his freedom. As soon as you reduced God to an image, golden or otherwise, you could polish and feed and clothe the idol, dominate him, control him, make him up according to your own will. So God said, “No, sir-eee, you're not going to trap me in any graven image. I'm going to be free, to express my own will, to walk through history, a living spirit, a free spirit of justice and mercy to every age, every generation.” I will be your companion, your judge, but I, the Lord God, -- will not be your pet. I'm not going to be captured by you in any one altar, in any one sanctuary, or dogma. You can't make a graven image out of me!”

And every time the Israelites tried to do that, they failed. And the prophets kept saying, “You can't reduce God to your image. He will speak his piece” or die trying, and in the crucifixion of Jesus – he did just that. You can see how this works at home too. “You get a fixed image in your head of someone you love, you trap them in some past likeness, you don't allow them to change, to grow, to age, to alter – you don't realize they are changing, you don't let them be the persons they now are. Do that and you're in trouble. Know what you've done? You've killed love. Or here's a man who has an image of his wife, graven in his head thirty long years before, which he will not allow to change. He's in trouble. Or, here's a mother who still sees her child as he or she once was in the picture on the dresser, pink cheeks, curly

hair, and what she always thought was a smile. Now, because she never allowed the little tike to grow up, it's a snarl. She's in trouble.

And what's true of God and the family is true of society. Whether we like it or not, the world is changing, changing very fast and we feel threatened, intimidated by it – so we mistakenly think we can control it by reducing it to stereotypes – the good guys vs. the bad guys and will fight it out, but the world is far too tightly packed now for us to choose up sides and slug it out between graven images. Do you know what the 20th Century has invented? We have invented inventions. It's really too late in world history to hate each other's stereotypes. We're all part of one package now. So, God may win in a way we never intended for him to win: we may have to “love one another”.

Now we have to behave like persons, like human beings, or we die. “We have to give up hurting one another, God, you win!”

Let us pray:

O Lord Jesus Christ, you are God's true image. And you were never a graven one. You healed the blind, let the lame walk, set sinners free. You were full of surprises. Neither the Pharisees nor your own disciples could predict you, box you in. You never hated or hurt. You freed the good in all sorts and conditions of women and men. You love even us. Teach us to be like you. Amen