“Good Jealousy”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Zechariah 8:1-8
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Is there really such a thing as good jealousy? The only jealousy I have known is bad jealousy.

Isn’t envy one of the seven deadly sins? St. Paul regards jealousy as a killer sin in his letters to first century churches (Romans 13:13). His famous love chapter in 1st Corinthians 13 tells us “love is not jealous, boastful, envious or rude” (13:4).

Jealousy is what drives King Saul to throw a spear at David, the king-in-waiting. When people swoon over David’s military victories, Saul becomes insanely envious. We are told that Saul “keeps a jealous eye on David” (1 Samuel 18:9).

I think of Shakespeare’s well-known play Othello, in which everybody is undone by jealousy. Iago warns Othello, “O, beware, my lord, of jealousy. It is a green-eyed monster.” If jealousy is a sin, why is God called, in Scripture, a jealous God?

This summer, we’re preaching our way through the Minor Prophets. Several Sundays ago, I read in Nahum’s prophecy that “The Lord is a jealous and avenging God” (1:2). I wondered whether anybody was going to pick up on this jealous God reference. I would have been hard-pressed to give a satisfactory answer, given that God and jealousy don’t ordinarily go together. For the record, no one asked!

Today’s passage makes this matter of God’s jealousy unavoidable. God declares through the prophet Zechariah, “Thus says the Lord of hosts. I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her” (8:2).

The Ten Commandments begin with the twin commands, “You shall have no other gods” and “You shall have no idols.” Then we are told, “You shall not bow down to these idols, for I, the Lord your God am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5). The same words appear later in Exodus: “You shall worship no other God, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (34:7). Is jealousy really one of God’s names?

Jealousy has two essential meanings in Scripture. The first meaning is comparable to envy. The Ten Commandments forbid us to covet anything belonging to our neighbor. We are well-served to count our blessings. But
jealousy prefers to count other people’s blessings and then weigh them against our blessings.

For the second meaning of jealousy, we have only to change the “j” in jealous to a “z” “I am zealous for Zion; I am burning in zeal for her.” The relationship we enjoy with God is often compared to an intact marriage in Scripture. Married couples are zealous in love for each other. Three is a crowd where marriage is concerned.

Zechariah, like Haggai last Sunday and Malachi who is still to come, are considered post-exilic prophets. They prophesy in the 6th century BC, during the time when God brings Israel back to the Promised Land after a 70 year exile in Babylon.

God declares, in verse 8, “I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem.” God’s rationale for bringing Israel back from exile is provided in the next phrase, “They shall be my people and I will be their God.”

This last phrase is absolutely foundational to Scripture. “You will be my people and I will be your God,” is the promise God makes to his people repeatedly in the Old Testament. Everything hinges on these little words “your God” and “my people.” God is declaring, “You are mine and I am yours. I will give myself to you just as you give yourself to me.”

Most agreements between people are established with contracts. Business deals are contractual in nature. A contract mutually obligates two parties to the terms of the agreement. If one party breaks the contract, the deal is off.

God doesn’t establish a contract with people; God cuts a covenant with us. Our covenant with God cannot be broken. It is irrevocable. I’m reminded of God’s word in Judges, “I will never break my covenant with you” (2:1). Our covenant with God cannot be broken. Even when we are unfaithful, God is faithful. God keeps His promises.

Yesterday, Chris and I were stuck in the mother of all traffic jams on the Garden State Parkway. We had forgotten about the Saturday beach
traffic to the Jersey shore. Finally, we inched our way to the New Jersey Turnpike, only to read the overhead sign, “Major traffic delays between exits 8 and 9.” I was not thinking happy thoughts. I was not drawn to prayer. I still had a sermon to finish. My covenant with God in that moment was not maintained by me. I was kept by God because God keeps His promises.

The Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper remind us of God’s irrevocable covenant. Every time I baptize a child, I speak that child’s name and then call him or her a “child of the covenant.” When I recite the words of institution at the Lord’s Supper, I announce, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Corinthians 11:25).

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? When you wake up tomorrow morning, start your day by being thankful. Before you do anything to maintain your relationship with God, be thankful that God is faithful. Be grateful that your efforts at obedience will not preserve this relationship with God. We can rejoice because God keeps His promises.

My other so-what application to this sermon addresses what we can do to maintain this covenant with God. Even though this covenant is maintained by God and not by us, there are things we can do to keep this covenant vital and dynamic.

The Bible has a lot to say about idolatry. Let me supply a working definition of idolatry. An idol is anything we need apart from Jesus to make us happy, satisfied or fulfilled. Idols, then, are not only bad things. They are good things elevated to positions of preeminence. I can make an idol out of money, my stuff, sports; you name it.

I used to think of idolatry as so Old Testament. Nobody makes golden calves or graven images anymore. What was I thinking? We can make an idol out of anything.

I have three suggestions related to this matter of idol-making. First, identify your idols. Second, identify them to one other person. Third, practice Christian disciplines.
First, identify your idols. If you’re having a hard time identifying idols in your life, ask yourself three simple questions. What do I think about? Where do I spend my money? What do I run to for comfort and security?

If nothing comes to mind, you may be tempted to conclude that you don’t have idols in your life. I can manage everything just fine. The first step toward spiritual health is recognizing that we have a problem with some area of our lives.

Let’s suppose, for purposes of illustration, that your idol is money. This is not merely a hypothetical example. Some of us think about money a lot. We strategize about how to save money and spend it. We worry about having enough of it. The first step toward dethroning the idol of money is recognizing the hold money has over us.

Second, identify your idol to one other person. Confession breaks the power of secrecy. As long as an idol has us all to itself, it will mess with us. Satan, whose name in Scripture means “the Accuser,” will exploit secrecy to heap all manner of shame and guilt on us. By naming our idols out loud, we empty it of its power.

Can you imagine what a huge step it would be for us to acknowledge to someone else the idol we’ve made of money? The secrecy would be broken. God can do so much when we admit to each other our struggle with deeply ingrained sins.

Third, practice the disciplines. Defeating idols is not merely a matter of willpower. We’ll never root out deeply-resistant sins merely by trying to get rid of them. Shift your focus to God and His sufficiency. Meditate on Scripture. Pray the Psalms. Establish Christian friends to encourage and hold us accountable.

Let’s return to the example of money. By leveraging spiritual practices, we counteract the undue attention we give to the Almighty Dollar. We can pray about what to do with our money. One primary way to disarm the power of money is to give some of it away. We can search what the Bible
has to say about money. Incidentally, this won’t be hard to do since Jesus talks more about money than most any other subject. Money happens to be a chief rival to God.

We’ll invest 31 Sundays, beginning in September, to reading The Story to help us practice the Christian disciplines. Nearly 80 percent of Scripture is written in story form. Publishers have invested considerable time in condensing the Bible into narrative form. The chapter and verse delineations have been eliminated so that it reads like a novel.

Our goal in reading the Story together is not simply an academic exercise. Our ambition is to increasingly make our life story life part of God’s Big Story.

Furthermore, we’ll encourage you to gather in micro-groups. We are finding it increasingly hard to get 8-12 people together for small groups. We want you to identify one to three other people to read The Story together. You may consider someone who doesn’t go to church who may be interested in joining you in this journey. Lots of people have reading the Bible on the bucket list of things they want to do.

We encourage you to buy The Story and to begin to identify people in your circle of family and friends to form a micro-group. So what about the next month? What can you do now? Let’s go back over the three steps: identify idols in your life, identify these idols to one other person and practice the disciplines. Eliminating idols is not a simple 1-2-3 process. The process of dethroning an idol that has long been a source of comfort and security can last a lifetime. Yet, it’s a journey worth taking.