

# "Idolatry"

Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, October 8, 2017

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Psalm 63:5-12 and Exodus 20:1-4

## Psalm 63: 5-12

*My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,  
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips  
when I think of you on my bed,  
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;  
for you have been my help,  
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.  
My soul clings to you;  
your right hand upholds me.*

*But those who seek to destroy my life  
shall go down into the depths of the earth;  
they shall be given over to the power of the sword,  
they shall be prey for jackals.  
But the king shall rejoice in God;  
all who swear by him shall exult,  
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.*

## Exodus 20:1-4

*Then God spoke all these words:  
I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;  
you shall have no other gods before me.  
You shall not make for yourself an idol,  
whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above,  
or that is on the earth beneath,  
or that is in the water under the earth.*

Will you pray with me? Gracious and loving God, we do seek to listen. We seek to hear, to hear your voice alone speaking to our souls in the silence, amidst the cacophony of sound, and noise, and voices around us, your still, small voice and to know that you are God. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

This first part of the Ten Commandments, which we read, they're familiar words, I am sure to all of us. "You shall have no other Gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." These commandments, under [Gerd?] the law of Israel and of the Jewish people, have always

been a huge part of the Christian tradition as well. And we must understand this, especially with these first two commandments. That they were taken with utmost seriousness by the ancient Israelites, especially the prohibition on idols so much so that, in the history of ancient Israel, even the name of God was not to be spoken. Yahweh, that name that was given to Moses when he was given the Ten Commandments. Even that name was not to be spoken because, to speak it, might begin to give it power, a kind of magic. It might become a kind of idol for us to even say the word and turn us away from the worship of the one true God. That's how serious they were. They recognized that idolatry can be very subtle in our lives. And, in fact, I think it is, in our world and in our lives, sometimes a very subtle phenomenon. For very often, beliefs, and practices, and cultural understandings, both those stated and unstated, especially the unstated ones, those we're hardly even aware of, all of these can subtly take the form of idolatry, becoming those things that actually begin to govern our behavior, and our actions, and our outlook, and, sometimes, can be in actual contradiction of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the one true God. Oh, it isn't that we won't be continuing to go to church. And it isn't that we won't look like we are practicing the faith. It isn't that we are in some ways practicing the faith. But some of our behavior sometimes and some of our actions, our actual beliefs, some of the prejudices that might begin to seep up in us that we're hardly aware of-- these betray the heart of the Gospel.

So I want to tell a story on myself. I grew up in the town of Elko, Nevada. Sure you've all heard of it. I was born in Winnemucca. I'm sure you've heard of that, but it's a smaller community in the northeastern part of the state. The people who raised me were good people. They were, and they gave me a lot of good things. But as we all know in growing up, we take the good things with the not so good things. And there was some of that as well. On the edge of that community, there was a Shoshone Indian reservation, a small collection of what I can only describe as shack type houses. The Shoshone children attended public schools with us, but it never occurred to me in all of those years of growing up in Elko and of all the schooling I had there, my elementary school years and my high school years-- never occurred to me to ask myself or was I really encouraged to ask why these people, the Shoshone, lived on this reservation and why they looked to be so dirt-poor and why my mother would periodically have me-- this wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but she'd periodically have me collect my old toys and old clothes, some of which were a little bit worn. But we'd take them out there. But we never studied in school the history or culture of those people even though their children attended school with us. I didn't even know they had a history or a culture. I just took it for granted somehow what I had learned.. And most of this, what I had learned, was actually unspoken. I don't know how I learned it, but somehow I had learned that they were sadly an inferior people and culture to us and that actually they were quite lucky that we had come along and taken their land and settled there because we had a better way. Also somehow learned that they were inherently lazy and prone to drink and that, above all, we were smarter and more refined. Now, behind all of this, as I've thought about it, was an unspoken narrative, an unspoken narrative of our Euro-American, white superiority and that it was somehow ordained that we would be dominant and privileged in this small town.

Like I said, this is not the only thing I learned or the only narrative we lived by, but this was one of them. And this unspoken narrative did govern a lot of the way things were in that town, in terms of social class and privilege and opportunity. And, so, that part of that narrative, that part of the narrative of that small town, was, in my mind, idolatry, plain and simple, because it, in fact, overshadowed the gospel of Jesus Christ. It, in fact, contradicted the gospel of Jesus Christ that we learned about in church. We were church-going people. But, nonetheless, this idolatry, I would call it, governed a lot of our life. And I tell this story because, you see, this was so subtle. If you'd have asked any of us, we'd have denied it. We would have said, "Oh, you're crazy. We don't really think that." But this story of superiority that I grew up with was mostly unspoken and mostly subconscious. And so it causes me to wonder about these words of the 62nd Psalm that were read. For God alone, for God alone, my soul waits in silence. What these can mean for us, maybe even be liberating for us, for God alone my soul waits in silence. There are no other Gods before the one true God.

What can this mean for us today? It seems to me, at the very least, that it means that we are being invited to listen, and to listen deeply. To listen, first of all, within ourselves, and bring to an awareness of that which may, in fact, be governing some of our behavior. And, then, to listen to that other voice, that still small voice. And here's the good news. The good news is that our faith tells us that we do this in a context of grace, of grace. In a context of being loved by our creator God, a God who does not want our destruction, a God who wants our restoration, a God who wants to forgive, a God who wants to rejoice with us. And here's the other thing, what I was telling the children. We have clues, in the words of Jesus, and in the message of Jesus, and in the teachings of Jesus. We have clues about the voice of God, words about loving our neighbor as ourself. Words about loving even our enemy, and praying for our enemies. That's hard. Many, many words about forgiveness. To forgive even 70 times 7, if need be. And I know in some situations, with some things that are sometimes done to us, that's hard. Words that encourage us to act like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, waiting at the gate, waiting, deeply desiring the return of this wayward son, waiting to forgive, waiting to restore, waiting to rejoice, not waiting to do him in.

The words of the Good Samaritan, that we should not pass by, but to care, and give comfort, and give sustenance. We have these words and so when we say for God alone, my soul waits in silence, are we not first of all being invited to examine ourselves and the narratives, cultural mores, by which we might be living that are counter to the gospel? And invited to change that which needs to be changed so that it bends towards the arc of justice, the justice and peace and compassion of God? But here's the other thing, idolatry does not only operate on these social levels. Sometimes it operates in very, very personal ways. Or sometimes, messages that we are giving ourselves that we're hardly even aware of but that we give ourselves nonetheless are self-destructive, they undermine our belovedness. Sometimes we find it difficult to really embrace the proclamation that God loves us, unconditionally loves us because we feel like we cannot be forgiven for whatever it is we have done. Sometimes those things live within us for a long time. Sometimes we have these messages, I don't know, from childhood that we are not enough. That we are not talented enough, that we aren't gifted enough, that we aren't like those people over there. We refuse subtly God's outreach of love to us. Might not really realize we're doing it, but we do sometimes. That God is standing at the gate and waiting for us, ready to welcome and ready to forgive. Ready to restore, ready to rejoice.

There's a story that a pastor named Janet Wolf tells. She wrote a little article entitled Chosen For. It's a story about a woman in her congregation named Fayette. A true story. In a new members class, she writes, we talked about baptism. This holy moment when we are named by God's grace with such power that it won't come undone. And she says Fayette, this woman named Fayette was in the class. A rather unlikely participant, I would-- she would said, in this new members class. She was a woman living on the streets at the time struggling with mental illness and with lupus. She was there nonetheless, she was in the class, she wanted to be part of this congregation and she loved the part about baptism. And she would say to us over and over again, sometimes interrupting whatever discussion that they were in, she would say over and over again, "And when I am baptized, I am." and she would pause, and this pastor writes we all soon learn to respond, "Beloved precious child of God and beautiful to behold." And then she would say, "Oh, yes." And then we could go on with our discussion. Well, the big day came and Fayette went under, obviously not a Presbyterian, but she went under and came up sputtering and cried, "And now I am." And we all said, "Beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold." And she shouted, "Oh, yes," and danced around the sanctuary. It probably was a new experience for the people of that church. Two months later, this pastor writes, she got a call. Fayette had been beaten, and raped, and was at the county hospital. So, of course, she said, "I went immediately." And when she got there, she could see down the hallway and into the woman's room, she could see her pacing back and forth. When she got to the door, she heard, "I am beloved." She then turned and saw her pastor, and she began again, "I am a beloved, precious child of God." And then she caught an image of herself in the mirror. Her hair sticking up, and blood, and tears streaking her face, dress torn and dirty, every button askew, and I am sure those old

narratives which had plagued her life, of being unlovable and not nearly enough, were rattling around in her. So she started again. "I am a beloved, precious child of God," and pausing again, she looked in the mirror. And then she declared, "And God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful I'll take your breath away."

Restoration. Hearing. Listening for the voice of God. My friends, we all stand before a loving God just as we are. And you know what? We are susceptible. We are susceptible to letting our lives be governed by lesser gods at times, by lesser narratives, but nonetheless, we stand before a gracious God, reminded that we are created in God's image, blessed by the gifts of the Spirit, as well as at the same time flawed and wounded by life's journey. God, the one true God, to whom our souls deeply desire to listen to in silence, this God does not abandon us. This God still hovers over us. This God is still speaking, still loving, still desiring our wholeness, and so may it be so. May it be so, that we will increasingly have no other gods before the one true God, and that these idols that do beckon to us will crumble, will crumble before the power of Grace, the power of God's Spirit, the power of the Divine One, who loves us. Amen.