

“Idols”
Exodus 32:1-10; Acts 7:36-53;
Matthew 7:7-14

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As we begin to think about the idea of idols, I wondered if there was any way we could get our hands around what “idol” means. Some of you have noticed that there is a picture up there of something that is in the common culture of our day that uses the word “idol.” It’s a picture from “American Idol.”

I think we have begun to use that word a lot. We idolize somebody when we have a person who can perform incredibly well. Yet all the spectacle that goes with it leaves a little question in my mind about how much of it is merely spectacle. It’s wonderful to honor somebody for what they can do, the ability to perform, but just in the nature of calling it “American Idol,” perhaps indicates we are giving it more attention than it really deserves. There’s something in that idea of idolizing someone that suggests that maybe we’re putting them on a pedestal higher than they might really need to go. For all the use of it as a word of honor, there’s still that sense that maybe the accolades are over the top.

Certainly as we look at the biblical word we can see how the word “idol” is defined, Though the word is never actually used in the Exodus story that we are looking at, we know that’s what it’s about. They made an idol. It’s useful to look and see how it’s defined in that biblical perspective. They are making something to fill in where their fear has left a vacuum. They want something that they can look to and say, “This is what saved us.” It’s interesting to me that shortly after they make something that they can ascribe to having power, they then have a big party, perhaps to get over the recognition that maybe it may not be the real thing, but if they get happy enough it will certainly look that way and feel that way. Of course, when Moses comes back, he’s not too happy.

I think we begin to see the nature of idolatry. It’s giving something power—a power of function or explanation or centrality to our lives and to solving life’s problems—that isn’t real. In that way, it begins to be in competition with God.

It’s easy to think back on how the Israelites did that thousands of years ago, but I wonder if we do anything like it. There was a comic in the paper a couple of days ago about a young woman who was talking to her mother on the phone, and her mother is asking what to do when her computer crashes. The young woman says, “I just turn it off and say nice words to it and sing to it, then I turn it on and it works again.”

Idolatry is ascribing to some object or to something that we do the power that it really, truly does not have. That is kind of a cute example of a move toward idolatry, thinking that singing and saying nice words to your computer is what fixes it (some of us would really like that to be the case, but it’s not). There’s a certain seriousness that goes beyond such a simple example.

A guy named René Girard suggests that another way that we create an idol is through the idea of sacrifice. Over time, and it’s in this story from Exodus, human

beings have come and sacrificed to their idol. It's the idea of ascribing power to making a sacrifice and changing the way the world works, how a deity acts, and/or how the divine influences things. His suggestion is that the idea of sacrificing something becomes powerful because it often coincided with the thing being solved in the first place. Sometimes by blaming a certain group of people, making them the sacrifice, the rest of the people are no longer in tension with one another and gather around because they have something to focus on. That sacrifice begins to take on the form of idolatry. It's what makes things better when it's really more a function of how human beings work. The question is do we continue to form idols? Is there a way in our own lives that we do some kind of idolatry?

I think that there's not that much difference between us and those folks many, many years ago. It seems to me that often what idolatry is all about is not listening to the right voices. Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, a play about an unusual combination of a Moor and a young woman, and they are very much in love. But then Othello listens to the wrong voice. His advisor, Iago, tells him that his wife is unfaithful, and through his own pride and arrogance and inability to listen to the right voices, it ends in tragedy. So you might say the idol is his own honor, or the idea that he is right in spite of everything else, a lack of humility.

If we look at the breadth of times where we can see things that are combinations of not listening to what is right, we can go from the Iago of Shakespeare to the Iago of *Aladdin*. Something about that breadth in itself—a Disney movie to Shakespeare—both of them about listening to voices that aren't being true leading to tragedy, although in *Aladdin* you have a hero come and avert the tragedy. Idolatry seems to me to be listening to the voice that isn't true and letting it become central to our lives and shaping who we are.

I bet we could look across the span of movies and find how many times it is that the movie is about somebody who takes something that is not right and thinks it is, and it causes all kinds of problems. The question in my mind is what is the remedy? We'll come back to that later.

It seems that people have recognized for a long time that we do this. From Calvin to present day there's the suggestion that the human heart is a factory for idolatry. We tend to look for things to solve our problems in an easier way, or the way we think will work. I think there are some things that drive that. I think one of the things that drives that is our pride. We don't want to be wrong; we want to make sure we are right. Another thing that drives it sometimes is our fear. We want to solve our fear, so we do what we think will quickly solve that fear. Too often I think that leads us to force things, or even leads to violence. Perhaps it can be something as easy as an expectation or sense of entitlement that we shape things around—our fear of not getting what we think we should get. We could think a lot about the ways that forces in our own lives lead us to do those kinds of things. What might it be in my own life that I give some kind of centrality to that shapes things in a way that might be in conflict with the way Jesus would lead us?

I think the remedy is to look where Jesus leads us. That's what he's talking to his disciples about: where he wants to lead them. He invited them to recognize that where they really need to go is to knock, and search, and find what they need with God. It's paying attention to that relationship, going in search of what God tells us, knocking at the gates of God's kingdom. He goes on to say that God is not going to give you something bad. He's saying this is the direction to go. There's a narrow gate, he says, a narrow gate through which we might go.

The interesting thing is that he makes this contrast between the broad and the narrow roads. There are many ways we can choose to do things, but how many of them are good? How many are grace filled or love enhancing? How many are relationship-enhancing, making relationships healthy or bringing righteousness and justice, you might say? He moves from that to give a one-liner that sums it all up. Sometimes when we hear that simple formula, it seems so easy. He simply says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But when you begin to think about what that means, how hard it really is.

We talked earlier in the service about Refugee Day, thinking about people who are leaving their homes because of war, natural disaster, or somehow feeling that their lives are in danger. We have to put ourselves in that position. If we were in that position and for some reason we were fleeing disaster, what kind of greeting would we want? When Jesus asks us to do unto others as we would have them do to us, it becomes an incredible touchstone for our lives. It gives a step along the path. It's a beginning place of seeing the fullness of what he's asking of us.

As he goes on, he says this narrow gate, this narrow road is a hard way, but it is the way that leads to life. I was struck by that because I was thinking of that in contrast to what he said about his load being light, so we should come and follow him. Sometimes there's a way things just don't seem that they should work that way. In the physical world, why can you use one slighter thing to lift something that is heavier than itself? We've gotten used to it, but it still seems like a mystery to me. If you try lifting a heavy object directly it doesn't work, but if you put a fulcrum on it, all of a sudden you can lift it up. There are ways and things that happen that almost seem like they don't make sense at first.

Think about the idea of the way being hard, and take a simple idea like a lie. The lie may seem the easiest thing to do, but over the long term it can turn into an incredible burden if you try to keep it up. It gets blown up, or you begin to bear the burden of guilt. But if you tell the truth the first time, as hard as it may be, the burden is gone and it is a way to life.

How easy it is to try to find the easy way, the idol, and yet the real hope, the real goodness is through Christ and the way he teaches us. It's as simple as doing unto others as you would have them do to you. His is truly the path that leads to life. Amen.