

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Vocabulary of Faith: Idolatry
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March 10, 2019

Exodus 32:1-6; Colossians 3:1-4

I am going to begin this morning by reading you a list of things and I would like you to figure out what these all have in common. Here we go. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, crucifix, statue of the Virgin Mother, drugs, rap music, cell phones, iPads, video games, the Trinity, movies, pornography, sex, nice clothes, expensive cars, church, cross jewelry, the NFL, NBA, NHL, MLB and all their stadiums, Nike apparel, money, military power, border walls, guns, the flag, restaurants, relationships and my favorite, Alexa. And for those of you who don't know Alexa, she is not a she, but a voice activated personal assistant. What do these things have in common? They are all, according to the internet, idols. They are things that we worship other than God. While some of these may not come as a surprise, chances are that many of them do. And they do so because we know what an idol is. It is a statue that people worship. It is the Golden Calf of the Great Golden Calf Incident in Exodus 32. However, I believe that a retelling of the Golden Calf story, and its basic theme, meaning the saving work of God, will help us make a connection between that calf and all the things mentioned above.

Let's begin. The Israelites initially arrive in Egypt because God is saving them from a famine. Unfortunately, they become slaves and their life is hard. They cry out to God for deliverance. God hears their voices and sends Moses and Aaron to negotiate with Pharaoh for their release. The negotiations do not go well, but then God sends a few plagues and the people are given their freedom. As they leave, God has the Egyptians give the former slaves all sorts of parting gifts including gold jewelry. Once the people were in the wilderness, God provides them with water and food. Knowing that the people need guidance by which to live, God calls Moses to Mt. Sinai to receive the law. While Moses was gone, the people began to be afraid. God didn't seem to be around, and Moses was running late. Rather than wait for either of them to show up, the people melt down their rings and make an object, a calf, which they then declared to be their god, and they worshipped it (note the theme...everything they have is a gift of God). What this means is that they chose to worship the gift rather than the giver (Calvin's definition of idolatry) and in so doing made something other than God the giver the primary object of devotion. Thus, anything or anyone we make the primary object of our devotion, can be an idol.

Making something or someone, other than God, that is the primary object of devotion; that is the working definition I would like to use this morning to describe idolatry. What I mean by the primary object of our devotion is not simply describing that one person or thing to whom we bring a valentine card, or flowers on their birthday. Something becomes the primary object of our devotion when it becomes that something or someone on which we focus most of our time, talent, treasures and trust because it is the one which we believe will give us meaning, purpose and protection. (Jesus reminds us of this when he says that our hearts are where our treasure is.) Looking for someone or something other than God to become the primary object of our devotion makes sense because, as human beings, we live a tenuous existence. As corporeal beings, we live in a world we cannot control and one from which death will one day take us. This leads to anxiety and insecurity. Because of these two realities we seek that which can organize our lives in such a way that we find meaning, purpose and protection. And, if we are honest with ourselves, it is far easier to find that security in something we can see, touch and perhaps taste, than it is in an invisible God. This seeking explains Calvin's statement that the human mind is an idol factory...always looking for the next thing that can be the primary object of our devotion in which we can find meaning, purpose and protection. What this means then is that all those things I first listed, if we allow them, can be idols.

Why is that a problem? Why shouldn't we make something we can see, touch or taste the primary object of our devotion? There are two Biblically based answers I would offer.

First, making someone or something other than God the primary object of our devotion will ultimately bring disappointment, fear, anxiety and not joy. Let me ask, how many of you have ever had buyer's remorse? Right, and we have it because the things we cannot live without, that we must have, that will make us complete, always let us down. They will let us down because they do not, in the end, possess the power to give our lives meaning, purpose and protection. While they may claim to do so, sooner or later they will fail us, and we will have idolater's remorse. People will not live up to our expectations, objects will break, politicians will let us down, those things that we believed we could not live without...there will be something better next week. What happens then is that we go looking for the next thing to take their place with a sense of disappointment and not joy. If you want to see how this works, simply look at our beloved Detroit Lions. At the beginning of each season we invest ourselves in them, don our liturgical sports clothing, visit their downtown temples, perform the appropriate liturgy (the wave, making noise when the other team has the ball...you get it) and believe that this will be the year. However, somewhere toward the end of the season we begin to feel disappointment set in once again, leaving us unfilled, disappointed and empty. This is what happens every time we make something or someone other than God the primary object of our devotion...we end up with idolaters remorse.

Second, making persons or things the primary object of our devotion, gets in the way of us receiving what God wants to give us. When I was a child, we only had one television. I know, it is hard to imagine such deprivation, but it's true. And whenever I would wander in front of it and become mesmerized by its glowing images, I would stop and stare, which proves that some things never change...and then my father would say, "John you make a better door than a window." At which time I would realize I was blocking the view. This is what idolatry does. It blocks our view of God. It keeps us from seeing and receiving all that God has to offer. For God desires to give us a love that is deep, wide and eternal. God desires to give us safety that will watch over and care for us regardless of what happens in our lives. God desires to fill our lives with meaning and purpose as God's own children, called to love and be loved. When we allow objects, people or things, to come between us and God, they become better doors than windows and keep us from receiving all that God desires for us.

How then do we keep the appropriate perspective? How do we keep our minds from making things in this world the primary object of our devotion? The answer is to look up. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Colossians, "*So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above.*" What he means is that we keep our eyes, our minds and our hearts appropriately oriented toward God in Christ, such that it is only in God that we seek meaning, purpose and protection. It means that we consciously orient ourselves daily to the One from whom all life and love flows. The gift of doing this is twofold. First, it allows us to receive all the gifts of meaning, purpose and protection that God desires we receive. We can become people who live with hope and not disappointment, with peace and not anxiety, with joy and not sorrow. Second is allows us to enjoy the gifts that God gives us. We can enjoy the Lions without being depressed when they do not win the Super Bowl. We can enjoy our relationships, our tech and our travels for what they are, knowing that we are not dependent on them to make us whole.

My challenge to you then is twofold this week. First, I ask you to make a personal inventory of your life, looking for those things that you might have made into the primary object of your devotion and when you find them, remind yourself that they are gifts and not the giver. Second, it is to daily look up; to look up to God throughout the day, reminding yourself that it is in this giver alone that we can find meaning, purpose and protection.