

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Genesis of Our Faith: Idolatry  
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Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 4:32-35

Idolatry has gotten a bad reputation...Okay, now that I have your attention let me explain.

Making idols, or producing an image of a god, was originally a way for people to worship their gods as they traveled from resource to resource. When humanity was still largely nomadic tribes, they needed something that represented their gods that could travel with them. Small carvings in stone or wood served their purpose well. These statues bore the image of the god so they could worship wherever they were.

As nations arose that had static centers of power, leaders also wanted their people to worship their image and so they commissioned idols to be made to remind their citizens who was in power. The emperor or pharaoh would put these image-bearing idols strategically around their territory. This served to inform invaders who they would have to deal with if they crossed the border and reminded citizens whom they owed thanks for their safety and to whom they owed taxes too.

Idols were a way to distinguish who belonged to a community and who a person showed loyalty to. If you visited someone and they had a idol of Osiris you knew who they worshiped and maybe found fellowship with someone with a similar belief as you. If a home had the image of pharaoh on their front door, troops knew to pass them by because they were loyal citizens.

This kind of imagery is still seen today. We put our leaders on our money, we build statues to local heroes, and we hang flags outside our homes to show where our loyalties are. The images we surround ourselves with show our values, who we think deserves to be emulated, and gather around common goals. Idols are not innately bad. They are just images of the things we see as valuable enough to display prominently.

There is a reason idols have collected a lot of baggage over the years though. Some of the images leaders have used to inspire loyalty become symbols of the destructive values they encouraged. The swastika is an example of how an idol, one image that represents a leader and the values of a group of people, becomes a symbol of the hate and violence the people who flew that flag embodied. Idols are not bad, until they are used to stand for something evil.

This story in Genesis encourages us to examine what our idols stand for and what is being promoted by their use. In this story we meet humanity when they are still one community, a community that was able to imagine and invent incredible things. In fact, their newest invention is the brick. Before this new technology they were limited by stone. Stone is hard to build with. It needs to be found, moved, shaped, balanced, and placed just right among other stones to make a structure. Bricks though stack very easily. A person can make hundreds of bricks in one day and exponentially increase building potential.

The humans of Babel are so proud of this technology they decide to make a structure that will project who they are into the world. This tower will be the image of who they are, they are powerful and they are innovative. LOOK AT WHAT WE CAN DO!!!!

God however wanted the brick to be used in a different way. God is not opposed to the tower but God can see how consuming the project is going to get. The humans set their sights on heaven. An outrageous goal sure to fail and God knows they will never be satisfied with the tower's results. Once their eyes are set on making a tower that reaches heaven, it will become all consuming. All brick production will be directed to the tower. If anyone wants to use bricks for something else they will be denied access. It will become the focus of all their energy. They could be making stronger homes for their families, or a hospital, or a worship space, but instead humanity hoards the resource into one tower.

Collecting and hoarding resources is not what God wants for humanity. It is not how creativity is supposed to be used. God creates to increase diversity and humanity has lost sight of that by hyper focusing on the tower. God steps in to redirect their behavior. Their language is confused and they are split into groups that then find new places to settle down and create new communities. It is easy to imagine how one group might have taken the technology of the brick and built a great wall that can be seen from heaven. Another group may build a massive library filled with all the knowledge of humanity. Another group could have built a temple to honor God with the new technology. What was going to be one tower now becomes an incredible variety of structures equally as impressive and in line with God's love of diversity.

God could see how entrapped humanity was going to get in the tower and God knew the potential this new technology had. God wanted to see what humans could do with bricks and so it took splitting us up for us to live into our potential. That is how idols become an issue when they become all consuming. When we hoard resources to feed the idol and turn all our energy to upholding what the idol stands for, we lose sight of potential diversity and new ways to use the resources available to us.

We have come up with a few more amazing technological advances since the brick. I wonder if any of you know what Coca-Cola, Listerine, Slinkys, Play-Doh, and Rogaine have in common. They were all invented with one purpose but allowed diversity to turn them into the successes we know today. Coca-cola was originally intended to help people with morphine addictions and now it's a favorite drink internationally. Listerine was originally a floor cleaner; now we wash our mouths with it. Slinkys were made to stabilise nautical devices until someone accidentally knocked it off the workbench and brought joy to everyone who saw it slink about the work room. Play-Doh was first made as a wallpaper cleaner and now it's stuck in all of our carpet, I mean it's been a childhood favorite toy for many generations. Rogaine was made to lower blood pressure, and while it did that, it also caused increased hair growth.

Imagine our world if any one of these inventors had hoarded their invention and focused all their energy on maintaining their original purpose for their new technology. Thankfully they listened to others and allowed for their vision to shift and diversify. They let others share their ideas and create the products we enjoy today.

When an idol is created it can be an image that rallies community and declares shared values. It can also become a distraction. When we become too invested in maintaining the idol and presenting it a certain way it limits the possibilities for new and better expressions of who we are. That is why this scene from Acts stands in direct opposition to what happened at Babel.

The early church is gathered and they collect their resources but instead of building something big and beautiful to declare to the world "here we are" they meet the needs of their community. They make sure everyone among them is fed. They house and clothe everyone in their community. Everything they have is shared amongst them. If someone is in more need than another, they make sure they get everything they need to be equal to the rest of the community. Nobody has more and nobody has less.

The Roman empire at first did not care what the Christians were doing. They assumed it would be attractive to the poor, soon run out of money and resources, and collapse under the economy of Rome. But it didn't. And what was worse, it was attracting the rich too! They felt fulfilled by the message of gospel in a way their possessions and power had never been able to make them feel. The Christians kept growing and Rome got scared.

This was a really threatening structure to the empire. If these pockets of Christians could prove that a communal structure like this worked, it meant more pressure on Rome to provide similar social support. Roman emperors did not like the structure of shared resources because frankly it meant they would have less. This fear sparked the organized persecution against the early church. The violence of the colosseum all but wiped out Christians solely because their way of living was disproving the need for empire.

God's idol was proving more enticing than the emperor's idol.

God's idol is what the early Christians rallied around. They were committed to the image of God placed in each human being they met. Humanity was God's idol. By caring for one another they were committed to presenting the image of God in the best way possible. Where they saw sickness they worked to bring health to that image of God. Where they saw starvation or thirst they worked to repair the person so they could better present the image of God.

It was a great offense to smash or deface the idols that bore the image of someone's ruler or god, and the early church took offense when they saw God's image without proper nutrition, or when they saw God's image naked, or when they saw God's image being killed by unjust systems. God placed an image inside of every human that is the idol Christians work to honor.

It is an idol that encourages diversity and ensures equality. When I have something you need, I honor the image, the idol, of God in you by sharing my resources. Then when I am in need, the sharing comes back in my favor. It is a system everything in our world demands we reject because honoring the image of God in every person completely negates the ideals of empire. It is a system we have not yet lived into the full potential of but Babel is yelling at us through scripture in every language imaginable to keep working towards God's diverse and innovative way of sharing. The tower will never do us any good. Hoarding resources will never be what God wants for us. When we have something of value we must fight the urge to build a tower for our own glory and instead break it apart and share it. Because our God's image is inside humanity. We must open our eyes to where the image of God is being suppressed and choked out of existence and offer the nourishment it needs to survive.

Where the world creates idols that attract energy and resources, our idol lives in every human being we encounter. The empires of this world will fight against this way of living. They will try to isolate us, make us too busy to notice who is in need. They will make us afraid of the change that will lead to true innovation. The work of restoring God's image in this world will be hard work, and we will do it anyway.

Until we are one in heart and mind and there are no needy persons among us. Amen.