

AMERICAN IDOLS – PART 1

TEXT: Exodus 20:1-7

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on August 7, 2022

In the summer of 2004, I took a six-week sabbatical and pastored a Methodist church in Stirling, Scotland. I had all my sermons prepared before I went, so most days I was free to explore the country, as long as I was back at the house each night, and I took full advantage, going each day as far as my little Peugeot would take me.

In some ways the trip reminded me of the first time I lived south of the Mason Dixon line in this country. I learned then that the Civil War was not, in fact, history but was still very much alive and well. In Scotland, I learned that the wars between Catholics and Protestants were also very much alive. Protestant/Catholic tensions are as foundational there as racial tensions are here. I saw that literally in stone as I travelled around the country.

From cities to small hamlets, there are churches, most of which are many centuries old. Those still in use are frequently former Catholic churches and cathedrals, taken over by the church of Scotland; but what really struck me were the ruins of Catholic cathedrals. In place after place, all of the beautiful carvings and statuary were defaced. In one, every single figure had been beheaded.

This was not done by roving atheist hordes; but by devout Scottish Protestants who believed—as many still do—that all images in churches, even images of Jesus, are a violation of the commandment given to Moses to not make a graven image. The technical word for a person who believes that is “iconoclast,” which literally means an image-destroyer.

While most Christians today don’t go so far, the belief that the commandment about not having idols is about physical images of divine figures is still the root assumption in almost all Christian circles. That makes more liberal churches gloss over the commandment as a relic of a bygone age and makes conservative churches strip their sanctuaries of anything but geometric patterns. Often such churches don’t even have a cross. Both responses, I believe, are an enormous mistake; a mistake that allows the idols God was really trying to guard against to waltz into our lives and take up residence without so much as a check of their ID.

So I’m going to be spending a few weeks trying to pry open that limited understanding of idolatry so that we can open our eyes to see and stop the idols we are gleefully allowing to run amok in our homes, churches, nations, and world. This is not about Christianity versus other religions; it’s not about statues of fertility goddesses or pagan rituals. This is about the kind of idols that are, right this very moment, fueling our political divisions, the climate crisis, the war in Ukraine, income inequality, racial injustice, and the rise of authoritarianism both here and abroad. Oh, and it is idolatry that has taken a wrecking ball to the church.

Understanding those connections is where we’re headed, but we need some context first to be able to see idols for what they are and to get a new framework for understanding them. That context begins in Exodus 20. As Christians, we join with Judaism in lifting up the Ten Commandments as important. But Christians have largely lost sight of their role within the Torah.

I did a whole sermon on them at the end of March, so I won’t repeat all of that here. But I want to note that the injunctions included in the commandments are intentionally broad. They introduce the Law of Moses as almost a table of contents. Within the Torah they function as broad statements of the values and priorities of God.

They represent the marriage vows of the covenant between God and God’s people; an agreement on the values that will guide our treatment of each other in the relationship. While every marriage has moments when you have to work out the details of who walks the dog, cooks, and takes out the trash, those details aren’t part of the wedding ceremony. There the promises are broadly to be faithful and to love, honor, and cherish “for as

long as you both shall live.” The expectation is that those core values will shape all the very specific agreements you make in the years to come—particular agreements whose details will likely shift as circumstances change, but whose overarching values are still in keeping with that initial promise to fidelity, love, and honor.

We are already going astray if we try to parse the Ten Commandments too closely. They give us the priorities, not the specific rules, that will prove us faithful to a life with God. As I described back in March, the commandments also have an order to them; and I see those that Kim read this morning as all being wrapped together.

To paraphrase what we consider the first three commandments, God is saying, “I—the God who just liberated you from slavery—must always be your top priority. All other concerns are secondary. And I am, who I am. I am not, and must never become, a god of your own making. If you create something and treat that as your top priority instead of me, you’ve called yourselves my people in vain. You’re free to do that—it’s your choice—but it will not go well for you or your descendants.”

Seeing those together allows us to see what God means by an idol. In the days of Moses, the people had many gods and, notably, the commandment doesn’t forbid other gods. The commandment doesn’t demand that we have no other priorities in our lives; it’s telling us that a relationship with God means putting God’s priorities first and making God’s highest values our own. And then follows a list of those priorities: A balance of work and rest, honoring those who raised us, preserving life, letting others keep what is theirs, being faithful to our spouse, being truthful, and being content with what we have.

Most importantly, this is all framed as an offer. Neither God nor Moses imposed this on the Israelites. The terms were laid out and they were asked to say yay or nay. Those today who want to make the Ten Commandments the law of the land, have already violated the intent of the God who offered them. They are the terms of covenant relationship with God and we are free to accept or refuse them. To impose them is to make the commandments themselves into an idol; giving the words of the text priority over God’s own intentions.

And that brings me to probably the most important point for today. An idol is not about what something is, but about how it functions in our lives. When we’re looking for idols, we aren’t looking for bad things. In fact, the most powerful and insidious idols in the world are things that are, in their proper place, sacred, beautiful, and life-giving. They become idols when they displace God as the supreme value that must be protected at all costs.

For example, Jesus says in both Matthew 6 and Luke 16 that we cannot serve both God and money. It’s plain elsewhere that Jesus doesn’t condemn money; money is a useful tool for exchange. But money becomes an idol when we build our lives and communities in service to it; when it ceases to be a means to an end and becomes the end itself. Pretty soon we find we are sacrificing everything else we hold dear. We steal. We kill. We covet. We destroy the only planet where we can sustain life, rather than stop our quest for more and more and more.

When we misunderstand idolatry, we might also think money is the problem and go to the opposite extreme. But idols describe the function of a thing, not the thing itself. As many have pointed out, 1 Timothy 6:10 does not say that money is the root of all evil. It says that the *love* of money is the root of all evil. Money itself is a useful invention. Making it our top priority, turning it into an idol, is what gets us into trouble.

God begins the Ten Commandments by reminding the people of how they got to this point. God freed them from slavery. The behavioral covenant offered to them in the commandments, and by extension to us, is the roadmap for keeping that freedom. God is the great liberator; idols enslave. God offers; idols demand. If we displace the God who liberates with something else—even a very good thing—all the other values on the list will, one by one, disappear from our lives. It is very, very easy to let that slip.

All the great goods of life: our work, our families, our country, our church, the Bible—you name it, all become distorted beyond recognition when we decide to put them where only God belongs. They cease to function as loving support and begin to rule over us, demanding the sacrifice of our other values. Before we know it, we're screaming that we're pro-life while murdering abortion doctors, creating a police state while claiming it's necessary to protect our freedom, and becoming enraged that white Christians are somehow under siege when we literally hold all the levers of power.

The kind of up-is-down world we're living in isn't evidence of stupidity, although the intentional erosion of our systems of education over the past few decades is part of how we got here. But, overall, the chaos and violence of our time is a sign that God has been replaced with other priorities—that we have taken our eyes off the ball and allowed idols to take control.

Because one of the most insidious idols of our age is the Christian religion itself, I want to make sure you're hearing this distinction. When I say that other things have replaced God and become idols, I am not talking about taking prayer out of schools, having a diverse religious population, or otherwise trying to sever church and state. On the contrary, our refusal to make a clean break between church and state is why Christian nationalism is now one of the biggest idols and threats we face as a country. That will be a sermon all its own before we're done.

God is not a religion. God is a Who, not a what. The God of which these commandments speak is the God who liberates, the God whose nature is revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus, the God who both Paul and John say is love and whose Spirit within us produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The name you use for that God is immaterial to me, as are the forms and creeds and other religious practices built around your worship. The way I know we are serving the same God is finding evidence of our common struggle to produce that fruit in our lives. That is the God who urges us to maintain the freedom God won for us by accepting the offer of covenant relationship. And that offer begins with the warning that, if you put a different god first, all bets are off.

Chopping the head off a statue is not eliminating an idol; it's vandalism. Having a church sanctuary that is free from images is a perfectly fine way to build a sanctuary; but it doesn't provide the first bit of protection against idolatry. Idolatry is about how a thing, idea, or value functions in our lives. Does it help us live out the values God prioritizes in Exodus 20? Does it help us balance work and rest, honor those who raised us, preserve life, let others keep what is theirs, be faithful to our spouse, be truthful, and be content with what we have? If so, there's not a thing in the world wrong with it, even if it's a little statue we hang from our rearview mirror or put on an altar in our bedroom.

But if our top priority demands that we sacrifice those values; if we find ourselves cheering death in the name of life, sacrificing our marriage for our job, or embracing lies to serve something we imagine to be a greater good; we are already enslaved to another master. Our freedom is all but gone, just as God warned it would be. How do we get that freedom back? That's where we start next week. Amen.