

## AMERICAN IDOLS – PART 5

TEXT: Matthew 10:20-28

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on September 4, 2022*

### Idols in Idaho

In last week's episode of American Idols, we took a look at how, in John 4, Jesus created an atmosphere that allowed an important discussion about religious and political difference to happen without rancor. Both Jews and Samaritans had allowed something important—*where* they worshipped—to displace God's true priority, which is about *how* they worshipped.

In making the location of worship *the most important* thing, they created an idol—a good thing displaced the best thing. And because that concern was given too much attention, it caused hatred, division, and pain for hundreds of years. The resolution Jesus presented took that idol and put it back in its still-important-but-secondary place and warm and caring relationships were formed.

What that conversation did **not** do, however, was change the conversation at scale. Jesus, his disciples, the Samaritan woman, and her town could have a new relationship. But the rest of Israel still hated the Samaritans and the rest of Samaria still wanted nothing to do with the Jews. Helping one person or one small group put an idol back in its proper place is important to our lives as individuals. But when large groups are in active conflict, that kind of outreach can't be all that we do. It's necessary, but not sufficient. If the larger conflict is big enough, it will simply roll over our smaller efforts and the idol will squash us as part of the problem.

There are lots of things to consider in that larger scale response. But in responding *as a church*, whatever we do should be in keeping with God's values. It's easier to talk about all that with a particular example in mind. I might well have chosen to look at Tuesday's lockdown of Boston Children's Hospital from a bomb threat after anti-trans groups had been targeting specific pediatricians there for weeks. I might have used the example of the woman in Nashville who went to a major hospital on Sept. 1 for emergency surgery due to an ectopic pregnancy. She waited ten hours while her doctor tried to navigate the new extreme abortion laws to make sure he was allowed to save her life.

But I decided to use a particular case from a library in northwest Idaho to give us a bit more emotional and physical distance as we evaluate it. There were a variety of articles about the situation in different news outlets, but I chose the one that was local to the incident. What I will quote comes from the *Idaho Statesman*, and was posted online on August 22, 2022 at 5:19 pm. A link went out in Friday's Messenger, so maybe you've already read it in full. It begins:

*After a petition started last month to recall four Boundary County Library board members over a routine policy update, library director Kimberly Glidden has announced her resignation effective Sept. 10.*

*"Nothing in my background could have prepared me for the political atmosphere of extremism, militant Christian fundamentalism, intimidation tactics, and threatening behavior currently being employed in the community," Glidden wrote in her announcement posted by the library.*

*A push by a few parents to ban books with LGBTQ themes started early this year and "has snowballed from there," library board member Lee Colson said.*

*Widespread efforts to ban books and censor libraries are cropping up by groups across the Northwest and the nation, like an attempt to ban materials on gender studies from Mead School District's libraries, another librarian quitting over armed intimidation in Coeur d'Alene and Idaho House Bill 666 introduced earlier this year, which could have held libraries liable for checking out materials that could be considered harmful to children.*

*In Boundary County, a local group is attempting to recall four of the five library board members, including Colson, after the board approved an updated Collection Development and Maintenance Policy. The new policy says, "Selection of materials will not be affected by any such potential disapproval, and the Boundary County Library will not place materials on 'closed shelves' or label items to protect the public from their content."*

The next part of the article points out that not a single one of the books identified by those protesting is carried by the Boundary County Library. But they attacked the library director because she had decided to rejoin the American Library Association in May. As you might expect from the largest association of libraries in the United States, the ALA has policies to protect against efforts to systematically exclude any kind of subject matter.

In April, a report from the ALA found over 700 challenges to library, school, and *university* materials in 2021, the most since they began tracking such things in the year 2000.

Attempted book bans in the US in 2021 rose to 729, up from 273 in 2020. Eighty-six school districts in 26 states banned books (and, notably, also class discussion of certain subjects) in a nine-month period, predominantly focused on titles dealing with race and LGBTQ topics.

And the fact that the challenges are also hitting university libraries, says it's not just about age-appropriate material for children. Professors at the University of Florida got a note in early May reminding them that discussing or assigning reading on eight topics related to racism, sexism, and society in their classes was now illegal and that such restrictions also applied to any guest lecturers who might come to the campus. Failure to comply could result in a loss of \$100 million in funding to the university. But back to Idaho.

After noting that the group behind the petition to recall the library director and board members did not respond to the request from the paper for an interview, the article goes on:

*[Glidden, the director] has been hounded with Freedom of Information Act requests, a tactic to harass public officials, she said. The FOIAs, 'some quite outlandish,' are taking up so much time that it is difficult to run the library.*

*The threats against her have been veiled, but their message is clear, she said. During comments in public meetings, she has been warned with fire-and-brimstone language of her imminent damnation, coming from certain Christian fundamentalist groups who are known to believe they have a call to violence, she said.*

*Some people have stood quietly, armed with arms crossed, in the back of board meetings. "That doesn't make anybody feel safe," she said. Others have signed up to become library volunteers but show up armed and "just want to have that show of force in the library."*

*Colson said the new collections policy lays out clear procedures (which the old policy did not have) for library patrons to request or appeal the addition of a book, which can be brought to the trustee board for consideration. "The difference between what's happening here and the rest of the country is that our library does not have the titles that people are wanting to ban," Glidden reiterated. She said this is a dangerous first, because they are not hiding behind a veneer that it is about banning particular books.*

*It is really about control.*

*"Boundary County is a warning," she said. "It's not about the books."*

That's the end of the article.

The fact that, in all of these cases, Christian churches have been supportive of the bans and often, like in Idaho, are the ones generating the objections in the first place, makes me believe that Christian churches who have different views must engage somehow. But what is that response? And on what basis would a church take a position?

To reference last week, if we jump in for or against book and classroom bans based solely on the subject matter being contested, we're engaging our positions and not looking for the underlying interests, making it unlikely that we will resolve the issue. As the library director in Boundary County said herself, "It's not about the books." They didn't even carry the books.

Also, don't lose sight of the quote from Dr. Amos Wilson from last week. "If you want to understand any problem in America, you need to look at who profits from that problem, not at who suffers from that problem." Bearing in mind that there are many kinds of profit, who profits from destroying public education? Who profits from turning our kids into ideological clones instead of free and critical thinkers? Who profits from raising a generation that has no training in, exposure to, or even fundamental knowledge of the effects and long history of racism, sexism, and genocide?

I think the issue for churches raised by the article is bigger than any particular subject matter and relates to our Scripture reading for today.

When the mother of James and John comes to Jesus to ask a favor in Matthew 20:20, she wants Jesus to grant her sons the most powerful positions in the kingdom that she imagines Jesus is setting up. Jesus doesn't grant her request, but the attempt riles up the other disciples so that Jesus is forced to address it.

Like with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus shifts the focus of the conflict. He doesn't deny that there might be such powerful positions or go on about why filling them isn't his decision. Instead, he shifts his disciples from arguments about **who** might be given power to **how** power should be used by his followers. He says,

*You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. **It will not be so among you**, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.*

The heart of Christ, and therefore the standard for his followers, is non-coercive. It's about refusing to use whatever power we have to force others to do our bidding; to toss threats and intimidation aside as a means of getting our way and instead take up the role of a servant to others, and trust God for the results. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, James, John, Paul, and Jesus is the God who liberates; not the one who enslaves.

The quote with my yearbook listing my senior year in high school was John 8:32, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." God has hard-wired us for freedom because that's the only way that real love is possible. It can't be forced; it must be freely chosen. The God of Love and the people who have chosen to walk in that way can't use force without upending the whole project. God hopes we will choose to bind ourselves to vows and laws that will make the world a beautiful and safe place to live; but God will not force those vows upon us, even if we should decide to destine ourselves for ruin.

Forced conversions are not the way of Christ. Forcing God's commands on people who have not chosen to abide by them distorts the image of God in us beyond recognition. So, to circle back around, churches in Idaho and wherever else have every right to band together and petition government for legislation. But our case here has several red flags for followers of Jesus. A key one is almost a throwaway line in the article: No one from the group demanding the resignation of the library director and board members was willing to speak to the paper. If you aren't willing to make your case to the public beyond showing up with lethal force at library board meetings, you are not advocating for a position—you are trying to force it on others without debate or comment. Idols hide themselves behind threats; the truth does not.

Secondly, the followers of Jesus are to use their power, individually and collectively, to serve. Nothing about the interactions in the article would lead you to believe that those objecting to library policy are interested in loving their neighbors as themselves. If that were the motivation, they would speak to the paper and tell their story.

As the library director said, it's about control. That is the idol in all of these cases, the desire to force others to conform to one group's preferred beliefs. Not to persuade with facts and data; not to influence with stories of how something has affected their own lives; not even to put a policy to a majority vote—they are attempts to conform to an ideology at gunpoint, with bomb threats, with targeted harassment so severe it has driven some to quit, go out of business or in several recent cases, to take their own lives. And it's that desire to control others that Jesus tells his disciples to give up. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. Control of others is not.

So, if we consider how a church might respond to the growing national threat to public libraries and the freedom of people in local towns and villages to read the books they want, what does that look like? For individuals church members it might look a lot like Jesus and the woman at the well from last week—having individual conversations about our shared interests and concerns, reframing the issues when needed.

As a church, we might formally check in with our public library. Are they okay? Are they receiving undue pressure or harassment? How can we be of service? We value education here at Crawford and more broadly in Winchester. We understand the need for freedom to read widely to discern the truth and come to our own conclusions. How might we protect that? If you think it can't come here—well, Boston Children's Hospital would like a word.

The message of Jesus is that, while there are undoubtedly many forms such protection could take, there is one form that it must not take if we are to keep God's priorities in place. "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. **It will not be so among you**, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." Amen.