

“I, I Idolize!”
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St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The first time I heard the word “idol” was in the verb form, “idolize.” I heard it in this old song, “A, you’re adorable; B, you’re so beautiful, C, you’re a cutie full of charm...” Well, the “I” letter went: “I, you’re the one I idolize!” I was probably only about four or five at the time, and I had no idea what that meant...

Welcome back to our Ten Commandment series, “The Music of the Ten Commandments,” where I will attempt to preach *and* interpret musically the Ten Commandments of Holy Scripture.

Last week, we looked at the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Today we are looking together at the second commandment, which is clearly related to the first: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...”

As some fella said so long ago, “God created us in God’s own image, and we politely returned the favor.”¹ Human beings have an incorrigible habit of making God in our own image, of believing that God is just like us, only bigger: God does all the same things we do, thinks all the same thoughts we think, hates all the same people we hate. And if we hate ourselves, and feel like we are “wrong” or “bad” so much of the time, well then, God must think the same about us. And thus the image of the punishing, stern, distant –and, let’s be honest – male God is born.

I know, I know, scripture itself uses some of this imagery. But remember, our God cannot be contained, which means that even scriptural images (father, king, rock, etc.) fall short. Words and images cannot capture our God. Icons and statues cannot capture our God. And if we put too much stock in one particular image of God, or even name for God, then that becomes an idol for us.

I am not a statue
Something you can hold
I am your living, loving God

I am not a picture
Fading, growing old
I am your moving, breathing God

I live, I love, I move, I breathe
I am God who cannot be contained

I live, I love, I move, I breathe
I am God. You cannot know my name.

I am not the Bible
Though it comes from me
I am your living, loving God

I am not the cross you wear
Though it’s quite pret-ty
I am your moving, breathing God

I live, I love, I move, I breathe
I am God who cannot be contained

I live, I love, I move, I breathe
I am God. You cannot know my name.

¹ Reinterpreted from Blaise Pascal.

I am not some father,
Stern and ill at ease
I am your living, loving God

I am not a mother
Whom you have to please
I am your moving, breathing God

I live, I love, I move, I breathe
I am God who cannot be contained

I live, I love, I move, I breathe
I am God. You cannot know my name.

So, as I mentioned earlier, I had no idea what “idol” (or “idolize”) meant at age four. And, to be honest, when I think about the word today, I’m still not entirely sure what it means. So I looked up “idol,” and found two definitions: (1) an image or representation of a god used as an object of worship, like an icon; and (2) a person or thing that is greatly admired, loved, or revered, like a hero.²

The second definition makes me think of the show “American Idol,” where pop singer Kelly Clarkson, among so many others, was first discovered. Our culture does tend to idolize famous people – pop stars, great athletes, and so on. Why do we do that? And, is it so bad?

Well, I guess that has to do how we admire the person. If it’s because we think what they doing is really interesting or amazing, and it inspires us to do the same (to “fully flourish,” as we talked about last week), then it’s probably a pretty healthy thing, admiring someone like that. But if we put them up on a pedestal (and you know what they say about pedestals!), where they can do no wrong, where we don’t accept their humanness and limitations, that means that when they fall, the fall will be long and hard.

And besides, an idol is not real, right? It’s just our projection of something. I might really admire the pop star Kelly Clarkson, but I don’t really know her. I’ve just projected a bunch of stuff onto her. Which isn’t good for her... in fact, it’s not good for *anyone* we put on a pedestal, whether it’s Kelly Clarkson, or our father, or our mother, or our teacher, or the president. There’s really something to one of the translations, “You shall not make for yourself any graven image.” Something that is graven, or grave, is still. It doesn’t move. Hard as a rock, and serious as a stone. It’s not living, in other words. It’s some set of ideas we have about someone, but those ideas stick the people in a box, where they are trapped, where they cannot move. And who wants to be there?

²<https://www.bing.com/search?q=what+is+an+idol&form=EDGHPT&q=DA&cvid=d233ccf966414e318d4aa6e34ee7cae5&refig=c3b054c888f14604a73688dca573e645&cc=US&setlang=en-US>

Don't put me in a box
Don't put me on your pedestal
I loom so large to you
But I am human, too

You say I am beautiful
You say I am strong
You say I am brave and good
You say I can't do wrong

You say don't you dare fall down
You say, don't you pout
You say you don't want to see
My ugliness come out

Do you see how I am frozen here?
Do you see how I am bound?
Do you see I have no life, no breath
And how I long to be found?

So this whole being idolized thing isn't good for Kelly Clarkson, or for your father, or for whoever it is that we put up there on those pedestals. But it isn't good for me, for us, either. Because even if our idols don't fall from glory, we might constantly find ourselves comparing ourselves to them, and always coming up short. When I start seeing someone else's success and talent as something I could never achieve, and start to feel down about myself, then I am only hurting myself, and hurting myself deeply. Constantly comparing myself, constantly coming up short, I am not allowing myself to fully flourish, to be called into the person God knows I can be. And this is a very hard place to be.

She is better, she is brighter, she can do it all
She's the expert, she's the good one, standing there so tall

And me, I lose my way
And me, I can't compare
And me, I'm failing every day

He is loved, and he is fun and he is full of light
He always smiles, he's so at ease, he's never had to fight

And me, I'm not okay
And me, I just fall short
And me, I'm failing every day

O God, hear my prayer as I compare
As I cry out, it isn't fair. And do you care?

All I want to do, O God, is run away for good
My spirit's draining out of me, my hope runs out like blood

So hear my prayer, O God
And help to pull me up
Anoint my head and fill my cup

I want to hear your words again that you created me
I want to hear that I am loved, I long to be set free

So hear my prayer, O God
Revive me once again
And turn my enemy to friend

O God, hear my prayer as I compare
And take away all this despair. And meet me there.

Of course, God cares. And the second commandment frees us to completely reject all our idols – whether idols of God or anyone else. Instead, it insists on the one true God, the God who made and who loves us, the God who frees us from comparing ourselves to others, the God who removes all pedestals, the God who removes all images, all containers and boxes, the God who gives us life, over and over again.

Thanks be to God!