

“Idolatry”
July 19, 2020
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Exodus 20:1-5a

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.

Welcome back to our summer preaching series, “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith”! As most of you know by now, I’m preaching from a book that has influenced me so much over the last fifteen years or so – a book also entitled “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith” by Kathleen Norris.

In her book, Norris takes words like salvation, or incarnation, or idolatry – words that many of us may have heard all our lives if we were church goers – and begins to imagine these words in fresh, new ways.

...And that’s we will be doing, too. Each week, I choose one of my favorite words from Norris’ book; each week, we explore together we might start to hear some of these words as if we, too, are hearing them for the first time.

Last week, we looked together at the word “commandments,” which we began to imagine not so much as a bunch of rules to keep us from having any fun, but rather a bunch of *invitations* to lead us to a life that is full and free.

Today, we spend some time with the word “idolatry,” which, as it turns out, goes very nicely with last week’s sermon on the commandments, as God’s warnings against idolatry seem to frame the whole of the Ten Commandments from last week. The commands against idolatry, in other words, underpin the entirety of God’s Law.

So let’s focus there. Let’s focus on idolatry. What is idolatry? Kathleen Norris doesn’t exactly define it as she begins her chapter on the word; instead, she opens with this simple but oh-so-true statement: “Idolatry makes love impossible.”¹

Norris reminds us of the story of the Israelites and the golden calf, and how when she was a little girl, it was easy to think of idolatry in those almost farcical terms, like worshipping a big gold cow. Easy to distance ourselves from idolatry like that! That’s not something we would do! No gold cows around here! “So,” she writes, “Biblical images of

¹ Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), p. 88.

idolatry... were of little use to me as a child, seeming more comical than not.”² “But,” she continues, “I slowly began to understand that idolatry was more than literal worshipping of graven images when I was able to see it in the context of the great commandment that Jesus gives us... to love God with all your heart and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself.”³

In other words, idolatry – more than any statue – has to do with the way that we love. Or, remember how Kathleen Norris puts it, “Idolatry makes love impossible”? When we turn something, anything, into an idol, love – real love – is out of the picture.

Years and years after the Exodus, Jesus whittles down the Ten Commandments to this: “Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.” And if we think about it, any of these things – love of neighbor, love of self, and love of God – any of these can become idols if our devotion to them becomes unbalanced, if we give one or more of them too much weight. We all know we can love ourselves too much – that’s where narcissism and good ol’ fashioned selfishness comes from. And even religious devotion – love of God, or the idea of God, to the extreme – can become an idol if taken too far. As Kathleen Norris writes, “We can become so focused on our love of God that we demean other people in the process.”⁴

And what about love of neighbor? How can that be unbalanced; how can that be taken too far? When can our love of another person become idolatry? That’s what I’d like to focus on for the rest of the sermon.

One of the definitions I found when I looked up the word “idol” was this: a person or thing that is greatly admired, loved, or revered, like a hero.⁵ It’s true, isn’t it? Our culture does tend to idolize “heroes” – pop stars, great athletes, politicians. Why do we do that? And, when does it cross over and become idolatry?

Well, I guess it all has to do how we admire the person. If we admire them because we think what they doing is really interesting or amazing, and it inspires us to do interesting and amazing things too, then it’s probably okay, admiring someone like that. But if we put the person 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 own projections onto someone else. I might really admire the pop star Madonna, 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 Madonna, or our father, or our mother, or our

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵ <https://www.bing.com/search?q=what+is+an+idol&form=EDGHPT&qs=DA&cvid=d233ccf966414e318d4aa6e34ee7cae5&refig=c3b054c888f14604a73688dca573e645&cc=US&setlang=en-US>

teacher, or the president. One of the translations (not the one I read today) of Exodus 20:4 reads, “You shall not make for yourself any graven image.” I really like that translation. Another way to think about an idol is something that is graven, or grave. An idol is something that is completely still. It doesn’t move. Hard as a rock, and serious as a stone. A graven image – an idol – is not living, in other words. It’s some set of ideas we have about someone, but those ideas stick that person in a box, where they are trapped, where they cannot move. And who wants to be there? Idols are not good for the ones we, well, idolize.

So this whole being idolized thing isn’t good for Madonna, or for your father, or for your children, or for whoever it is that we put up there on those pedestals.

But it isn’t good for me – it isn’t good 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.

But the thing is, God knows this about us. God knows how we have this tendency to compare ourselves to others, and to so often hurt ourselves in the process. That’s one of the reasons idolatry is so dangerous, and why God warns us about it so much. It keeps us from fully flourishing, from being the people God calls us to be.

A rabbi once said to a man (let’s call him Jeff) who was worrying about the direction his life was going in: “When you get to heaven, God is not going to ask you, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ No, when you get to heaven, God is going to ask you, ‘Why were you not *Jeff*?’” God doesn’t want us to be the people we idolize; God calls us to be ourselves: fully ourselves, fully alive.

When God tells us to not have idols, God is showing us our freedom: the freedom to completely reject anything that gets in the way of loving God, neighbor and self in the best and most holy ways we are able.

And, of course, the strongest antidote to idolatry is insisting on the one true God above all else, the God who made us and loves us, the God who frees us from comparing ourselves to others, the God who removes all pedestals, the God who gives us life, over and over and over again.

Thanks be to God!