

## American Idol

Exodus 32:1-6; Matthew 26:47-56

Fifth Sunday in Lent, (March 18) 2018

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Nearly 500 years ago, Martin Luther said that what we trust is our god; that which we take refuge in during times of distress is our god (based upon Luther's *Larger Catechism*; cited in James Atwood, *America and Its Guns*, p. 22-23). To put it slightly differently, show me what you reach for when you're afraid and I'll show you what you worship.

So this morning let me be up-front and direct with you: America worships guns. We are addicted to guns and to what guns represent. We reach for our guns when we are distressed and we trust that our guns will save us. That's called idolatry.

In 1998, after giving his first speech as the president of the NRA, Charlton Heston was presented with an antique musket. He was thrilled as he held the gun aloft, he said, "Sacred stuff resides in that wooden stock and blue steel..."

Former NRA Executive Warren Cassidy said, "You would get a far better understanding of the NRA if you approached us as if you were approaching one of the great religions of the world" (both Heston and Cassidy are quoted in Atwood, p. 78).

Of course, we've all seen some version of the old bumper sticker that says, "You can have my guns when you pry them from my cold dead hands." In other

words, guns are sacred, ultimate stuff; they're worth dying for. Guns have become like God – they are the difference between life and death (from Atwood, p. 79).

Trijicon, Inc. a defense contracting company in Wixom, Michigan, manufactures gun sights using tritium, a radioactive form of hydrogen, which creates light around the target and helps the shooter to better “service the target.” ABC News reported in 2010 that the company etched two biblical texts on its Advanced Combat Optical Gun Sight. Both citations referred to light. The first was John 8:12: “Jesus said, ‘I am the light of the world; he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.’” The other was II Corinthians 4:6: “For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (Atwood, p. 80).

These gun sights are designed to help a shooter more efficiently kill another human being. To use Scripture on these gun sights is nothing less than blasphemy and heresy. It is the very meaning of the commandment to not take the Lord's name in vane. This is idolatry.

Now, let me pause a moment, lest any of you think I'm some sort of an “anti-gun nut.” Those of you who know me know that I grew up around guns and hunting with my father and my grandfather in West Texas. I learned how to shoot when I was young, probably before I was six. When I was in Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts I won the marksmanship trophy four years running at Scout Camp until I began to need glasses.

When I was a young man I continued to hunt and shoot but I also began to purchase more guns. I remember well the adrenalin rush and the sense of power when shooting and I remember the craving of wanting another gun. And another. Eventually, I asked myself, “What’s going on here? This is not about simply going hunting. There’s something *more* going on.”

I’m not an “anti-gun nut.” But I am a follower of Jesus. And Jesus continues to interrupt my life and call me to keep following him. Jesus shows me my addictions that enslave me and Jesus comes to set me, and us, free. Because of Jesus Christ I am asking what is this “more” that is going on with guns in this country and in the white church in this country?

Will Campbell tells the story of Horace Germany, a Church of God minister in Alabama who wanted to start a school to train preachers no matter if they were black or white. He was beaten almost to death by a white mob for it. Horace told Will, “You know, there’s a lot *more* to this race thing than just segregation.” In other words, there was something deeply spiritual going on. Racism was not, and is not simply about skin color or “let’s all just be equal.” Racism has to do with deeply spiritual issues of control and domination and power. It has to do with idolatry.

Well, there’s a lot *more* to this gun thing than the Second Amendment. Or hunting. My friend Peter Marty, pastor and publisher, says “We’re in golden calf country here, elevating a loyalty to the gun over a fidelity to God’s desire for abundant life. More than a hunting or safety device, the gun has become an object of reverence” (*Christian Century*, March 14, 2018, p. 3).

Today we read about the golden calf. In our Old Testament reading Moses is up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments from God. The first two commandments – Number 1 says: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Number 2 says, “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (Exodus 20:2-5).

Meanwhile, down below, the people have become impatient. Moses has been gone for a long time and God hasn’t done anything for them lately. They do not – and this is important to remember – they do not decide they don’t need the Lord God Yahweh, anymore. They don’t turn their backs on the true God. What they do is decide they need something *more*. Oliver Cromwell of seventeenth century England famously said, “Trust God but keep your powder dry.” Well, the people of Israel decide to trust God but keep their powder dry. Have a back-up god, have a god close at-hand they can reach for when they’re in distress. Have a god that gives them something *more*. They want God *and*... It’s always God *and*. Idolatry is God *and* some other god.

So while Moses is away, they lean on Aaron for another god, one they can see and touch, a god more user friendly. And Aaron tells them to gather all their gold jewelry, pile it together and then they melt it down and form it into the image of a calf. The next day they have a big party and religious revival all mixed into one event. They’re partying and worshipping and making sacrifices.

Meanwhile God sees what’s going on and God ain’t happy. God sends Moses down and Moses ain’t happy, either. God ends up sending a plague upon the people because they made the calf.

Peter Marty comments upon this story saying, “We’re living our own modern plague: 15,592 gun-related deaths last year alone. And it’s a plague of our own making” (*Christian Century*).

When we’re dealing with idolatry we’re dealing with something *more* than an inanimate object that we dance in front of. Idolatry is profoundly spiritual. Addiction gets us closer to what we mean. Golden calves, statues, or swords and guns, or tanks and missiles – when we give them ultimate and sacred allegiance we become addicted to them. It is not simply that an inanimate object, whether golden calf or olive drab Glock, becomes a living being with power over us. No, but the Powers of Death do use that sacred allegiance to enthrall us and pull us away from the Living God of Life. And like the people in Exodus, we never intend to turn our backs on the true God; we simply add our addiction to guns and violence and the sense of power and control to our worship of the God we know in Jesus. So we can gladly wear guns in worship and never see the blasphemy or put Scripture verses on the gun sights and never recognize the heresy. We think we are the most religious of all people. And perhaps we are – it’s just the wrong religion. It’s the religion of Death.

An old insight, at least as far back as Augustine, says that we become like what we worship. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our life and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming” (cited in Atwood, p. 23).

In our New Testament reading from Matthew, Jesus is being arrested by a large, heavily armed mob all bearing burning torches. Sort of a combination SWAT Team, religious militia and Ku Klux Klan all showing up in the middle of the night to arrest this one person they deem a threat to their power and domination.

Matthew says that one of the disciples grabbed his sword, John tells us it was Simon Peter, and struck the slave of the High Priest, cutting off the slave's ear. Jesus says, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who live by the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52).

Jesus does not mean that you'll die in battle if you use a sword or that the guards will kill you if you use your sword. What he's saying is that when you devote your life to the sword, the sword owns you. You become addicted to the sword.

When we start living by the gun it will take over our lives. It will rule us, shrivel our hearts, deform our souls, and pervert all we hold dear. All the while we're thinking we're using guns as nothing more than a tool to defend our loved ones and what we believe in. One day we wake up and we have become a willing acolyte to the Powers of Death. We have become what we have worshiped.

Peter reached for his sword when he was distressed and wanting to defend Jesus. Jesus was saying, "What you reach for when you're distressed is what you worship."

Let me tell you what I believe. I believe that for so long the white church in this country has been addicted to domination, power and white supremacy. The same domination that created the plantation economy is the same domination that has created the global economy and the same domination has created a military to enforce and protect that economy. It's the same domination that is destroying our planet for our children and grandchildren. But by the grace of God and the power of the living Christ, some of us are beginning to see our enslavement. Jesus Christ came, died, and was resurrected to set us free from the bondage to Death and Sin. Jesus is calling us to be freed from Domination and White Supremacy.

But Evil never stops. The Powers of Domination do not go easily and now the very church of Jesus Christ, the very people redeemed and called to be free, are finding themselves enslaved to another master. Guns. Another false god.

The Bible teaches and all my life I've believed that Jesus Christ is our Savior and our Lord. And the testimony of Austin Heights is that for fifty years we have sought to trust Jesus as our Savior and our Lord.

Here is an important story from our history. In Sept. 2005, a month after Hurricane Katrina had devastated New Orleans, Hurricane Rita came our way. That week, the population of Nacogdoches swelled from 30,000 to 45,000 people with evacuees from Houston and Beaumont. Our church building was one of the few places with electricity so we ended up having over 30 of us living here at the church, and that included a few evacuees. For meals we would have 50 or more show up for outstanding meals, since many of us had cleaned-out freezers and refrigerators. DPS officers and volunteers from other places would stop here and eat with us. During the day many of us went out and cleared debris while others of

us volunteered at the various large shelters in town, and still others did childcare and helped the evacuees here. That week was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. We were church as much as I've ever known.

At the end of the week I went down to put gas in my car and pulled in behind a big, one-ton dually pickup. I noticed the assault rifles hanging on the gun rack and in the back of the pickup were two 55-gallon drums along with about a dozen more gas cans of various sizes. The man got out to start pumping gas into all of those cans and I noticed his pistol on his belt, while the woman got out and stood watch and had a pistol on her belt. I backed up and decided I'd come back another time.

The Didache, an early Christian document dating just a few years after the close of the New Testament begins with these words, "There are two Ways, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the two Ways."

I saw what the Didache meant that day at the gas station. Here were two people who believed that they were on their own and that their survival depended on their ability to kill if needed. They were committed to the Way of Death. Meanwhile, up the street were 30 to 50 people who were committed to the Way of Life in Jesus Christ. It was a Life together of sharing and giving and serving and loving.

Luther said that what we trust is our god and what we take refuge in when we're in distress is our god. Austin Heights, we are a people who trust Jesus. In distress we took refuge in Jesus and each other. It does not mean we will be

protected from harm or that things will be easy, anymore than it was for Jesus. But it is the Way of Life.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.