

West Branch Friends Meeting  
April 30, 2017  
Sue McCracken, Pastor  
“ Idol Worship”

Scripture Reading: Exodus 20:4-5a and Psalm 40:4

A few years ago there was a prominent radio talk show host by the name of Dr. Laura who took calls primarily from woman who were having difficulties in relationships. I rarely agreed with Dr. Laura's advice, but I liked to listen to see if I could guess what she was going to say. I soon learned that Dr. Laura's most often given advice was to follow the Ten Commandments and then everything would fall into place. And while I won't argue there is value to be found in those commandments, there is no simple path to a perfect life, especially when we think about the second commandment:

***“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. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God...”***

So let's talk about this commandment a little bit this morning. And, like always, a bit of a history lesson is probably in order. Try to imagine, if you will, living in Old Testament days and it doesn't rain for days and you imagine there is some invisible cause – a god – who is unhappy with the way you have been living and is withholding the rains. And then it rains and it floods your land and your tents and you know there must be another god who is the god of rain and once again you've been displeasing to this god. And yet there are other problems, too, like the fact that you and your spouse have not had any children but your neighbors have more than they even want. There must be a god controlling who gets to have children and who doesn't.

It's hard for us to understand why people would think up all these gods because today we have the scientific understandings of why things happen – well, why MOST things happen.

But the Israelites in the Old Testament times were living among many tribal regions with a variety of religions and idols. For example, in Egypt there were many different Gods that were worshipped. There was:

Horus – a sky god closely connected with the king

Seth – god of storms and disorder

Thoth – a moon deity and god of writing, counting, and wisdom

Khnum, a ram god who shapes men on his potter's wheel

Hathor – goddess of love, birth, and death

Sobek, the crocodile god

Ra – the sun god

Amon – the creator god linked with Ra

Ptah, another creator god and the patron of craftsmen

Anubis, god of mummification

Osiris, god of agriculture and ruler of the dead

And Isis, wife of Osiris, mother of Horus and mistress of magic.

Then there is Asherah, mentioned in a number of scriptures, often viewed as the goddess of motherhood and fertility, and sometimes linked with Yahweh in the ancient Israelite religions. In fact, here's some history that may surprise you – it did me!

Between the 10th century BC and the beginning of the Jewish [exile](#) in 586 BC, polytheism (or the worship of many different gods) was normal throughout Israel; it was only after the exile that worship of Yahweh alone became established, and possibly only as late as the time of the Maccabees (a Jewish rebel army who took control and ruled over Judea in the 2nd century BC) that monotheism, the worship of only one god, became universal among the Jews. Some biblical scholars believe that Asherah at one time was worshipped as the spouse of Yahweh, the national God of Israel.

There are references to the worship of numerous gods throughout the OT books of first and second Kings: Solomon built temples to many gods and Josiah is reported as cutting down the statues of Asherah in the temple Solomon built for Yahweh. In second Kings we can read about Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh, erecting one of these Asherah statues or poles as they were often called, in the temple.

Another often-worshipped god throughout the Middle East was Ba'al, a god of fertility, weather, rain, wind, lightning, seasons, war, patron of sailors and sea-going merchants, and leader of ancestral spirits. Wow – not hard to imagine why the ancient people would want to worship this guy!

I could read you a list of hundreds of these ancient gods, and obviously, with many, many tribes within these territories, there were many, many ways ancient people – yes, even the Israelites - tried to explain the various things that happened to them, one obvious way being to imagine there were gods controlling all of life.

And even the first Christians at the time of Paul were confronted with the worship of Greek and Roman deities: Zeus was the patron god of the city of Lystra and his temple was there. Some Greeks identified Paul as the god Hermes, Zeus' attendant and spokesman. Paul tries to set the record straight, that he's not one of these gods, in Acts 17:24, 29 when he writes:

***“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.***

So what does this have to do with us today? I recently read some thoughts by theologian Matthew Fox that gave me pause to really think about this whole topic of Idolatry – idol worship - and I'd like to share some of them with you.

Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk, wrote that half-religious people are engaged in “the greatest orgy of idolatry the world has ever know, though that is generally not taught to be a great sin. For instance, when so-called Christian politicians use the name ‘Christianity’ to further their agendas to kill safety nets for the aged and the poor, and who oppose defending the earth from multi-national corporations and Wall Street - whose gods are the bottom line – these very gods are idols, substituting for honoring the real God – a God of justice, compassion, and creativity.

When the president of CBS was questioned about why the media gave billions of dollars of free air time to the Trump campaign but no such support to the Bernie Sanders or even Clinton campaigns he replied that “Trump may be bad for America but he is good for the bottom line.” That seems like a form of idolatry.

Indeed, idolatry by its very nature reduces God to an object—an object to be manipulated and used for our own interests (including getting elected, re-elected, or getting big money from big donors). Merton also notes that, “When God becomes an object, this God sooner or later ‘dies,’ because God as object is ultimately unthinkable. God as object...is hardened into an idol that is maintained in existence by a sheer act of will.” When we make God over into our own image instead of striving to be shining with the Divine image in us and in our actions—this is idolatry. Study is important to resist idolatry. We need to learn on a daily basis who/what the real God is and is not.

Then there is the idol of consumerism – a fetish for things we buy and feel we need to buy or have bought. In fact, our very economic system, to the extent that it creates and pushes us to buy more, is running on idolatry – that somehow the acquisition of more ‘things’ will satisfy the deep hunger and longing of the human heart – even if such buying results in other people going hungry, the earth being exploited, climate change raising the seas, and destroying cities and homes for the future of our great, great grandchildren. This kind of idol-worship will ultimately fail to satisfy the heart.

And finally, we can also make an idol of rational thinking itself. Einstein warned about that when he declared that we should not **overvalue** the intellect, for the intellect, he said, does not give us values; it only gives us methods.

Perhaps our seminary training needs a complete new start including training in how to be a mystic and how to teach others to be mystics, to experience that of the thin places where we catch a glimpse of the spirit world where we are one with God.

And as always, we have to get to the meat of the issue and ask ourselves, what do we worship? When asked that question most of us would say we worship God. But I’m not so sure I can answer that question that

emphatically because I have to consider what it is that is most important in my life.

Is it my house? When I moved to Iowa City, I looked at a number of condos, apartments, and town houses. I had never had the resources nor the time to look for the 'perfect' place I wanted to live. When I walked into the home I now have, I 'knew' it was the right one. And I can remember the many times after moving when I just had this warm, fuzzy feeling that I loved this place that I could finally call my perfect home.

And then there are vehicles....and for some it's what I call adult 'toys' – boats for pleasure, four-wheelers and motorcycles purchased mainly for having fun. I've always had a love affair with cars from the first Camaro I bought my senior year in college for \$3,400! It was a hard reality when that first car was totaled in an accident and I had to settle for being married to a poor farmer and drive old, used cars for many, many years.

And then there is always the question of the time spent on electronic mediums....my cell phone, computer, ipad, TV. Could some of these things be considered our idols?

Whatever I love more than God – whatever feeds my ego - that might be my idol. Could it be my children and grandchildren? Could it be my reputation? Could it be my clothes, my furniture, my love of shopping, my travels? Yes, it could. Most of us would not think about these things as idols, especially not something we worship....but....I wonder....and I'm thinking maybe....just maybe...they might be.

But they don't have to be. It's up to me to identify what I put my trust in, what I put my love in. And a good place to start is to simply ask myself this: is my love of the things I have and the things I do greater than my love and care for others, and my willingness to be there when others need to see my actions being a reflection of God living in me?

So as we enter our time of open worship, I encourage all of us to think about what idols we might be putting before God. It probably won't be some type of gold statue on a pole, but anything that harms others, the earth, or ourselves, just might be an idol we want to consider tearing down.

