

Naming Our Idols

October is Stewardship Month in our church. This is where church leadership makes their annual pitch for you all to pledge your financial support to Trinity for the next budget year. The Nominating committee is also calling people and asking them to serve in leadership capacities, so this is also a time to reflect on how you will share your time and abilities with the church. It takes more than money to have a vibrant ministry at Trinity.

This year the Stewardship committee has chosen “First: Putting God First in Living and Giving.” From the earliest days of God’s relationship with God’s people, God has asked that the people bring forth their first fruits and give it to God. Thousands of years ago, that would have meant bringing the first yield from the harvest--the fresh, new grains of wheat or sweet bunch of grapes. A First Fruit mentality is that we offer to God the first, freshest parts of our lives. In modern times, that might look like giving to the church First, before other bills and donations are paid. Or it might look like prioritizing church volunteering before other community commitments.

I recognize immediately this tension of prioritizing God among the other demands of modern life. And with full disclosure, although our family gives to the church, budget priorities skew towards paying rent, student loans, and feeding and clothing our children. If I put an extra \$20 in the offering plate, it is more as an afterthought, or because I feel like I can comfortably give a little extra. Sometimes God comes first, and sometimes God fits in the little gaps and leftover space after.

For the next three weeks, we are going to explore what it means to put God First in Giving and Living. And yes--we are going to talk a LOT about money, wealth, giving. We are also going to talk about our attitudes around money, and how they may or may not resonate with Christian discipleship. The goal of any stewardship emphasis is NOT to make you feel guilty about how much you do or do not give. Instead, it’s an opportunity to ask some hard-hitting questions, most of which do not have easy answers. And if we open ourselves to new possibilities, God will lead us in new directions in our lives.

We can’t talk about money in a Christian context without first talking about Idolatry. God feels so strongly about idolatry and false idols that God made it first among the commandments.

2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

3 “You shall have no other gods before[a] me.

4 “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.

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And then later on God reiterates the prohibition against making gods of gold and silver.

God led the Israelites out of Egypt (in pretty spectacular fashion!). God gave the people the Law-commandments for the prosperity of their community. And God made a covenant with the people. Sure, it wasn't an easy road out of slavery, but God promised and God continued delivered. Yet, not even a month later, the Israelites have grown anxious. Moses, their leader and liberator has been up on the mountain for another 40 days. No one has seen or heard from him. Moses must be out of cell phone reception. Maybe he was eaten by a bear? Fallen off a cliff? Moses is missing; so what does that mean for God? Had God abandoned them? Were they just supposed to keep waiting?

The anxious Israelites at the base of the mountain wonder if they can trust God. How can they trust in something they can't see? So they call for Aaron, the priest left in charge, to cast a golden idol in the shape of a calf. Now it's important to recognize that they were not creating a new god or finding an old god to worship. The people crafted a golden statue to reassure themselves of God's presence. And we can't really blame them. They were anxious about where they were, where they were going, and whether or not God would be with them. A Golden Symbol of Yahweh cast aside dispersions, and allowed the Israelites to go about their lives with renewed confidence.

There are lots of examples of idolatry, but in this interpretation, idolatry is placing one's trust in something other than God. The intent behind the first commandment is that because of God's covenant with God's people, we do not have to cast images of God. In fact, the images will only get in the way of our relationship with God.

It comes down to faith and trust. God has promised to provide. But it is all too tempting for churches to seek security in bank statements, budgets, and bottom lines. Because even though we can't see God, we can see our physical and financial assets. Many religious institutions have generous endowments but are loathe to spend any of the money, saving it for a rainy day. In seminary I applied for a year-long internship at a Presbyterian church about 3 hours outside of Austin. I interviewed and met with the pastor. I drove back to Austin feeling excited about the possibility. Days and a weeks passed and I heard nothing. Finally I received that unsurprising, but tepid email: "We appreciate your application but have decided not to go forward with the internship program at this time." I was stunned at this about-face. So stunned that I called up a mentor who said, "It was about money. That church is going to hold on to it's money so that it can hand it all over to JESUS when he comes back."

Exodus 20: 2-4
October 10, 2021

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When congregations and other religious institutions become fearful for their future, they tend to make decisions to satisfy a golden god, not the God who speaks from a burning bush. So I have witnessed congregations turn down ministry opportunities because they didn't think they could afford it. I've also seen congregations take a big step out in faith to support a new mission, not because they had money, but because they felt the Spirit leading them to a new opportunity.

We make idols in our personal lives, too. While our faith teaches to trust in God, the world teaches us to trust only in ourselves. I think most of us just get impatient. We grow tired and weary of waiting for God to show us the way, so we make our own way, and create little idols to reassure us. This short-view thinking denies us the expansiveness of possibility. As Mike Slaughter points us, "we humans might be short-term thinkers, but God challenges us us to not settle just for what we can wrap our minds around."

Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that while shiny new objects might provide temporary distraction, but that satisfaction doesn't last for long. There's a wonderful hymn that captures the call to place God First in our giving and living:

3 In gratitude and humble trust
we bring our best today,
to serve your cause and share your love
with all along life's way.
O God who gave yourself to us
in Jesus Christ your Son,
help us to give ourselves each day
until life's work is done.