

Sermon for Lent 3B
Sunday, March 3, 2024
“Thou shalt not!”

Texts: Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Psalm 19

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.” (*Exodus 20:1b-5a - KJV*)

Today’s message warns us against idolatry. We heard that at the beginning of the mass when we heard the Decalogue, and then we had the full reading of the 10 Commandments in the first lesson. But then, Jesus alluded to this when he went cleansing the temple. The ancient Israelites knew about idols. They had been enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, so they experienced the ancient Egyptian religion. They also encountered many nations and tribes around them who followed religions that worshipped idols. Idols are physical objects or pictures that people regard as a god and, therefore, worship the object itself as a god. When God told the Israelites in the 10 Commandments not to worship graven images, he was commanding them not to worship objects, but to worship him; he was real, he was present with his people, and they must not believe that a man-made object made of metal or wood could substitute for the real thing.

Jesus was saying the same thing, essentially. Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem. The Temple at the time was a majestic, imposing feature of the Jerusalem skyline; one could see the temple complex for miles around, towering on a hill above all else around it. In the middle of the Temple was the Holy of Holies, the inner chamber that housed the Ark of the Covenant, the very tablets on which the 10 Commandments were written. God was present there. The Temple had become not just a sacred place, but a place that people idolized. The people didn’t just worship God, they worshipped the place as well.

But they had made the place corrupt. The Temple in Jesus’s time was a place where sacrifice was made. I suspect that most of us here have never practiced or been exposed to a religion where the sacrifice of animals on altars was a principal feature of the religion, but animal sacrifice would not have been unusual for the people of Jesus’s time, because that is what most religions around them did, and it is what happened at the Temple. Because of the requirement for an unblemished animal to be sacrificed, businesses sprang up outside the temple and in the outer courtyards where people could buy an animal to be presented to the priests of the Temple for sacrifice to atone for their sins. It was more reliable to buy an acceptable animal there than to risk bringing

one's own after travelling for many miles, increasing the risk of the animal being damaged while in transit. The businesses designed to be a service for the faithful had become corrupt money-making enterprises in the name of the religion, and the sacrifice of the animals had become more important to the people than the Commandments that they were supposed to be following. They were idolizing the temple and the sacrifice. Jesus needed to set things straight; it was God whom they were to worship, not the place, not the ritual practices.

Who and what are our idols? Who or what are the things that we focus on so much in our lives that they take up all of our attention, they consume our time and energy? Each of us can come up with a different list of idols. Each of us has something going on in our lives that pull our attention away from God. The idols of our modern times don't look like graven images of gods; they are the vices that plague our world: greed, selfishness, envy, deceit. Everything has gotten so expensive that we need more money, more money. I know you all saw how much the Powerball and Megamillions lotteries are this week. Wouldn't it be nice to win all that money? (If you do, please tithe 10% to All Saints Church!). But we also get consumed with our wants, our needs, our desires. And if that's not bad enough, we idolize the people in our lives, whether they are in our families or the people we see on tv or the internet. Our world today has become full of idols!

By the time that our Gospel lesson was written, the beloved Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans. Jews had lost the very place where God was present to them, but the Gospel was written to tell people in despair that they did not need a building, or a place, or an animal. Jesus had replaced all of that with his very self. The very Word of God who had become incarnate and dwelt among humankind is the Temple and is the lamb. His death on the cross was the ultimate and final sacrifice for all of our sins.

We are in a "come to Jesus moment." Lent brings us back to reality to remind us that we have no need of the idols in our lives, because God is the one who provides the things that we need and helps us to do right. We haven't the power within ourselves to help ourselves, as today's collect says, but God has the power. Whatever idols you have in your life right now, whatever is consuming your attention or plaguing your soul, or bringing you down, give it over to God. Set it before God at the altar and let him take it from your life. Release it, let it go. Whatever is troubling you or whatever is pulling you away from loving God, or your neighbor, or your brother or sister or mother or father, or yourself, ask God to give you a heart to forgive and let it go. Lent is a time for cleansing and renewal.

I think St. Paul sums it up well in his letter to the Corinthians which we read from in today's second reading. He says that our faith is strengthened by recognizing

the things that God has done in our lives, by acknowledging how he has been moving in our lives all along, because he is so strong that even what's "weak" for God is stronger than all human strength. And he is so wise and knowledgeable that when we can't see the way forward or figure out what to do next, that God has already figured it out and made a way. And, if we remember the opening words of today's collect that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves, and ask, as the psalm bids, that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts to be acceptable in God's sight, then God, our strength and redeemer, will guide us toward him and toward righteousness. Then our lives will be manageable, survivable, livable, fruitful, and blissful, and the idols will go away. Amen.