

SERMON 110820

There once was a Japanese warlord who ruled over Japan in the late 1500s. His name was Toyotomi Hideyoshi. A story is told of how he once commissioned a colossal statue of Buddha for a shrine in Kyoto. It took 50,000 men five years to build, but the work had scarcely been completed when the earthquake of 1596 brought the roof of the shrine crashing down and destroyed the statue. It is said that in a rage, Hideyoshi shot an arrow at the fallen colossus, shouting, "I put you here at great expense, and you can't even look after your own temple."

Folklore or not...I can only imagine how some of our brothers and sisters in Christ our lives have used this to sermonize against making graven images... and reminding us of the second commandment against idols. In early days... and Jewish culture took idol worship very seriously...Rarely did Jews did become painters or sculptors... but as time went on most of us came to realize it's not so much the making of the idols but the worshipping of them that was the sin. .

If you are like me you have a hard time imagining ourselves worshipping a golden calf or a golden Buddha but make no mistake... you and I... we are very much wrapped up in worshipping other gods. .. our cars... our sports teams... our money... technology...guns, money...even our families..... and our political candidates.

I think most of us would agree that many people appear to have gone overboard with their politics ... almost to the point of it being an idol worshipping. In the past few years, faithful followers have toted signs... Obama is our Savior... Trump is our Savior. For some.... they've so identified with one candidate or another... it seems as if it has come to be a religion to them.

When politics... or anything for that matter is used as a way of identifying who we areof being our ground... as in defining who we are... that my friends... is an idol...

A couple of years back, David Brooks wrote an article about politics and idolatry.. he maintained that “When politics is used (or misused) as a cure for spiritual and social loneliness,” he said, “it’s harder to win people over with policy or philosophical arguments. When our candidate becomes the Messiah, it is not so easy to have philosophical and political discussion. Everything is shaped on a deeper level, through the parables, fables and myths that groups use to define themselves.” It should be said that people on the left and on the right who try to use politics to find their moral meaning are..... turning politics into an idol. Idolatry is what happens when people give ultimate allegiance to something that should be serving only an intermediate purpose, whether it is money, technology,

success or politics. (David Brooks: When Politics Becomes Your Idol, October 30, 2017)

And it's not just politics...

And it's not just politics... when you define yourself as a Christian... you are defined by God... by Christ and by the way Jesus lived and the things he taught... As one author says... "One of the hardest task of a Christian is to avoid the sin of idolatry. Our great challenge is to worship... God... God the father... God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.....rather than ourselves... And as the same author notes.. "Someone has said that god created humanity in God's own image and ever since humanity has been returning the compliment."

In our culture we are encouraged to focus on ourselves... to keep taking our emotional temperature.. to worry about ourselves... we have been told that it's up to us to fix the world." (William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, p. 19)

We don't have to wait for God to reveal and provide.... We can create our own purpose...it's up to us to discover the step by step secret to choosing the life we ought to have . There does not seem to be ... much waiting upon the lord any more. We hop on to the latest bandwagon of "self-help preachers who will tell us how to live our lives...self help books like *The Power of Positive Purpose* *Turning Adversity into Advantage...* *The Road Back to you...* *The Purpose Drive*

Life..... so whose purpose and to what advantage... who is doing the leading here... is it God or is it some author who thinks we are capable of making ourselves god..

That my friends is idolatry. These false gods get in the way of healthy living .. idolatry is worshiping of something as a god, which is less than God....not only is that not what God calls us to do..... it is not life-giving....in fact they can be life-sucking Jeffrey Statinover says, “Idols ask for more and more while giving less and less, until eventually they demand everything and give nothing....repeat, (ibid.)

Theologian Paul Tillich says a person is largely defined by what he or she places at the center and ground of his or her world.. .” (Pg 22) What we place at the center and ground of our personality is what the theologian Paul Tillich called our “Ultimate Concern.” Tillich believed that whatever we are ultimately concerned about, is in fact the god we are serving, regardless of what we may think we believe. And sometimes our “center”... as Tillich would call it... those “false gods” get in the way of a healthy life and to help them move toward greater freedom. Let me repeat that....

For instance, Jordan tells about a man named Harry who came to him for counseling. Harry talked about what he called “the rules of the game.” These were the rules handed down to Harry from on high... most likely family influences

which he believed he was bound to live by. These were the things that were at the core of his belief system... Mantras such as:

You have to be good and nice all of the time. You have to work hard every minute, or else you are not worthwhile. There is no place for joy in life, and if you start to seek it you better watch out because you will get completely off track and ruin your life. You are only worth loving when you are laden down with work and are acting nice and good. You will never succeed at being really loveable, but you'd better always keep trying, otherwise you are of no worth. This is how things are. That was his god... his religion...it is a religion of self. It assumes that you are the god and that you have total control over your destiny... we are in charge.. we are our own god... and doesn't that feel like the weight of that Buddha... and just as false...and it leaves us lonely and isolated.... And then we impose our god... that god on everyone around us.... That god of self-importance....and boy that god is unrelenting.. he's a task master... judgmental and disapproving.

It seems today that we've come to focus way too much upon ourselves... our abilities... our needs...and it leaves us lonely and isolated.... And it steers us away from our God and often from what God calls us to do... and the joy that comes with that calling. For some church is only a means of meeting our own needs... and as important as that is... meeting our own needs in not an end in itself...but a means by which we can better serve God.

When we worship self we find that the god of self is a task master... you will never be good enough... but the true God we should worship is the God of Grace

“Amazing Grace, that saved a wretch like me.” Grace is an ancient story, of a God who loves us, and forgives us for our shortcomings. Grace is the heart of our Christian faith. Grace reveals to us the true nature of God; a loving, forgiving and joyful Divinity who desires nothing less than abundant life for all people. My friends, if you are serving a god that is anything less than the God of grace, you are an idolater, just like me. You may not know it. Like me, you may not have any real consciousness about what your true ultimate concern actually is. But if you remember nothing else from my words this morning, I hope you will remember this: trying to make ourselves worthy — apart from grace — is not the solution. It is the problem.

Choose this day whom you shall serve...will it be the god of self who sucks the life out of you or will you choose a life that gives you the fulness of God's love... a life where a living God can shock us.. move us and use us for God's purposes...Only a true, living God can do that. (Wilimon, p. 20)

As St. Augustine once said “God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full and perhaps we are too full of ourselves to receive them.”

I pray that we may all learn to let go of the baggage that keeps our lives too full to receive God's good gift of amazing grace.

In France, they grow a lot of grapes, but in France they do not water the grapevines. California vintners use lots of irrigation, but not in France. The French believe that it's better to have a bad harvest one year than to lose vines due to drought. If you don't water your vines the roots of those vines go deep, deep, deep into the earth until they touch groundwater and become invulnerable to drought. The harvest may not be great one year but the vines will return the next year.

When we make the promises that structure our lives, when we say I believe, I do, Amen, we sink the roots of our faith deeper and deeper, so deep that these roots of our faith can handle our failures. We don't know what kind of harsh weather our lives will face; we don't know the twists and turns our hearts will take. We make promises; we stake our lives on promises confident in the deep, eternal well of God's faithfulness. We send our roots deep into the waters of life with God. In God we find our hope, our promised land and the words of eternal life. Where else would we ever want to go?

If you grew up in the South and are over 40, you may remember those signs along the highway that said, WHERE WOULD YOU GO IF YOU DIED TONIGHT?

Driving another mile or so there would be another sign with the words HEAVEN OR HELL and a question mark. Yet a little farther on would be a third sign which said simply John 3:16. I remember preachers at the revivals I attended as a child asking the same question as they tried to scare captive congregations into making decisions for Jesus.

But I am here to tell you that that is the wrong question. The question that is going to make a difference when you come to your last day is this: Have I fulfilled my purpose? Have I completed the work God gave me to do?

—Eyleen Farmer, “A complete life,” March 25, 2005.

holychommunion.org/pdf/sermons. Retrieved October 29, 2005.

—Paul V. Kollman, Campus Ministry Homily, University of Notre Dame, August 24, 2003, *Notre Dame Web Site*, campusministry.nd.edu.

So we are left

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