

Our Idols

Delivered on The Ninth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
August 9, 2020
Text: 1 Cor. 10: 1-13

In our reading from 1st Corinthians 10 this morning, Paul is continuing a theme that has occupied him in chapters 8 and 9. He has been speaking about the liberty of the Christian who is no longer under the condemnation of the Law. But he also wants to make us aware of the misuse of that liberty.

As you may already know, the Corinthian church had a lot of issues. There were factions vying for control of that church. There was abuse of the Lord's Supper. There was a lack of care for the spiritual health of young Christians and a predictable return to idolatry because of this indifference. There was indulgence in sexual immorality, for which Corinth was notorious.

Paul had been treating some of these problems already, but in the two chapters leading up to and including chapter 10, one of his big concerns has been idolatry. In chapter 8 he speaks to those who are firm in the faith, but through their eating meat sacrificed to idols, are causing weaker brothers to fall back into idolatry. Yes, Paul says, you who know that idols are nothing. But if a weaker brother sees you eating meat in a temple, might he not believe that the idol is a legitimate object of worship? It could well have been that these stronger Christians, while theologically correct, were seeking to preserve their social standing with their peers and superiors by accepting invitations to dine on food sacrificed to idols. In doing this, they were succumbing to the temptation to sacrifice a weaker brother for their social status. Hence, they have destroyed "the brother for whom Christ died." (8:11) In sinning against him, Paul says, "you sin against Christ." (8:12) He seems to have taken the Body of Christ thing pretty seriously.

In chapter 9, Paul argues for his right as an apostle and preacher to be supported by the church—yet he surrenders that right. Why? Because he wants to "make the gospel free of charge" (9:18) so that no one may suspect his motives. He then makes this paradoxical statement: "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave of all, that I might win the more." (9:19) How counter this is to our modern notion of liberty! For us, liberty means *not* having to consider others' needs, or what might cause offense, or cause them to stumble, or hurt the cause of Christ. For Paul, he considers himself blessed to share the gospel by subordinating his personal comfort to those to whom he is preaching.

To the Jews I became a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law...that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law...that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. (9:20-23)

He has set aside his own desires; he has, as he puts it, pommeled his body as an athlete. All so that he might not fail to present the gospel or cause anyone to stumble by his actions. Again, he is denying himself and putting others first. What a strange freedom that surrenders the right to do and say whatever he wants!

All of this serves as a little background to our passage from the 10th Chapter. Paul is warning the church at Corinth to beware the pitfalls of over-confidence in the faith, of presuming on God. He presents an extended typology in which the ancient Israelites prefigure the contemporary Corinthian church. Both share in God's great blessings and have partaken of Christ; but both have become unfaithful.

Paul is directing the Corinthians and us to learn from Israel's mistakes so that we do not repeat them. He first wishes to make the point that being blessed by God does not guarantee spiritual success. Look how many times "all" appears in the first four verses.

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. (10:1-4)

The Israelites had the protection of God and were blessed with heavenly food and drink, with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They were tangibly guided and sustained by God throughout their 40 years in the wilderness. They were God's people, the ones He loved and cared for. He wanted them to be holy as He was holy—a beacon to all the nations. But even with all the care the Lord had shown them, they presumed on his blessing and disobeyed his precepts in many ways: idolatry, fornication, testing the Lord, intermarriage with pagans, and all manner of complaining and rejection of His chosen leaders. They apparently knew better than the Lord what they needed. Many of them perished as a result of their sin and rebelliousness, and few entered the Promised Land.

Paul is warning the Corinthians and us to remember the troubling history of our spiritual ancestors, the Israelites. They were abundantly blessed, but became disobedient to God. They presumed on His grace and kindness. They were confident in their privilege, and so believed that they could flout God's commands. The danger of this over-confidence or spiritual pride is at the center of what Paul is teaching us here. "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." (10:12) This applies to leaders as much as the rank and file in the church. Why do you think Paul is so hard on himself, undertaking a grueling training and subduing of his body? Because the fall of a Christian leader brings disrepute to the gospel.

We are all aware that there have been recent moral failures by some high-profile Christian leaders, as well as many clergy and leaders whose public profile might not be as prominent. Their sins are often sexual in nature. Now people might be quick to say that the moral failure of a well-known evangelist, or someone in full-time ministry, does not invalidate the truth of what they preached. And this is a reasonable response. The truth of Christ doesn't depend on his flawed followers. But we also need to remember that Christianity isn't a theory someone just cooked up. The Christian message concerns a new Life, not just a new set of beliefs. A preacher, evangelist, or an apologist has a serious responsibility and charge. In an important

sense, he or she, as well as all Christians, are not just delivering a message—they *are* the message. If Jesus is really who we claim him to be and has done what we claim he has done, it should be apparent in the lives of those belonging to him. On the other hand, if someone is merely proposing certain theories, his behavior is often tangential to his doctrines. For instance, a secular philosopher can put forth brilliant arguments and observations whose validity is not undermined by his sexual libertinism (consider the late Bertrand Russell). But if an alleged follower of Christ acts this way, Christians are right to question if the Spirit ever really resided in him. We remember how inspiring this admired and influential leader was, and then wonder about the truth of the Gospel, if even its most able, passionate, and charismatic representatives can fall so far. The damage to the cause of Christ can be substantial.

This is why St. Paul spends so much time admonishing the Corinthians about their behavior and how their immorality defiles the church. He points out how the behavior of so many Israelites in the wilderness was evil and displeasing to God. It is interesting that Paul names idolatry first in his list of the sins of Israel, and immediately after the passage we read earlier says “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” (v. 14)

In a sense, all temptations to sin are rooted in idolatry. We idolize pleasure, comfort, security, control, our job, our status, our possessions, our family, our heritage, our nation, and our values. An idol is anything that replaces God as our highest allegiance. We are often not aware of our idols, but they are driving much of what we think and do. We can often reveal these idols by finding what makes us feel especially angry, fearful, or anxious. Very often it is a perceived threat to our idol. The power idols exert over us hamper our Christian witness and derail our sanctification because idols drive us to focus on our own well-being rather than to trust and serve God.

In the General Confession said at Morning and Evening Prayer we read

We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things we ought to have done; And we have done those things we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.

It is interesting that the General Confession puts sins of omission *before* sins of commission. That challenges the popular view that because we have not done such obvious and outward sins as the ancient Israelites, then we are in the clear. But sin is simply putting our own agenda before God’s will. We decide, though often not consciously, that we know what we need better than God does. We even might secretly believe that He is not really that concerned about our needs. Therefore, we must find our security and well-being through something in the created world. We give homage to that, and so become slaves to certain desires, attitudes, or orientations flowing from that idol within our heart.

This is difficult for us to see, because we are so opaque to ourselves. A true appraisal of our deepest drives is next to impossible. As Jeremiah says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (17: 9) We want to see evil as something outside of us and located elsewhere—in other groups, classes, institutions, or ideologies. That way we can see our job as one of trying to maintain social hygiene by isolating evil, as if it is

some object “out there.” We distance ourselves from it, and then seeking to eradicate it. But our Lord is completely clear here:

What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mk 7: 20-23)

The Biblical verdict is in. Evil resides in human hearts—including our own. But it is difficult to find anything more diametrically opposed to the spirit of the age than the view of the heart expressed above by Jesus and Jeremiah. Indeed, following the “devices and desires” of our own hearts is at *the center* of our culture’s self-understanding and is perhaps our ruling idol. Resenting laws that restrict our actions has been a problem since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. But in earlier times, there was the belief that society and its laws had an authority those wishing to be part of them had to acknowledge. Now, in the culture we inhabit, it has become a truism that final moral authority does not exist outside of the individual. A large swath of our contemporaries now see themselves as sovereign over what is true and right, as well as the locus of all meaning. They cannot imagine it any other way. Our inner psychological life has become decisive for who we think we are and what our purpose in life is—not any communal claims or traditional understandings. This valorization of our inner life—our devices and desires—describes the self-understanding of the modern person. The term philosopher Charles Taylor and others use for this is *expressive individualism*. Those under its sway believe that each of us finds our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires. These are sacrosanct. And as Carl Trueman states in his important book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, “we are all expressive individuals now.” (25)

This is the shape of modern idolatry. Again, all that tempts us to unfaithfulness to God is rooted in idolatry, a placing of some created thing in the place that God should occupy. It is always a question of where you locate ultimate value and meaning. Jesus found His ultimate value and meaning in obeying the Father. So while He was tempted just like us, He did not sin. He was tempted with all the devil had to offer; but even all the power in the world would not cause Him to turn from the Father. So Jesus knows about temptation. And God does not leave us to deal with it on our own because He “is faithful, and . . . will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (v. 13)

Temptation comes in many forms, and those who think of sin only in obvious, public terms can be the most blind to it. They are tempted to believe, for instance, that certain modern views comport well with Christianity—or are even mandated by it. And, as often happens, those views, or ideologies, or commitments come to occupy the driver’s seat, and Christianity is pressed into a supporting role. In the modern West, the driver is the sacred self of expressive individualism, aided and abetted by a privatized faith we view in primarily therapeutic terms. So just because we don’t engage in drunken orgies or worship golden calves doesn’t mean we are holy; it just means we are respectable. In the comfortable West, we Christians are very often guilty of sins of omission. We ignore the pain of many around us, similar to the Rich Man ignoring Lazarus. Because our faith has primarily become about our individual salvation

and escape from this sorrowful world, we don't see much need to model a Christian approach to social, political, familial problems *as Christians*. Instead, we want others to exercise personal responsibility (if we're on the Right) or the State to take care of it (if we're on the Left). Few Christians consider the possibility that the Church could act as an alternative culture to the culture of late modernity and display *publicly* what God wills for human society.

Christians today may not succumb to exactly the same temptations Paul is concerned with in Corinthians—though we are more like them than we want to believe. But we do succumb to others that, because of their subtlety, are perhaps more spiritually dangerous. Our sinfulness isn't new; it always flows from putting something else in the place God should occupy. But our sins are shaped by a quite different culture. And part of being in that culture is being subject to its categories. Unfortunately, most Christians have uncritically accepted our culture's facile belief in a strong public/private distinction; its idolizing of personal choice; its view that self-expression is the highest value; its denial of any moral authority outside of the individual. It is time for Christians to challenge these views and the idols they betray. It is time for Christians to push back against the view that the Church must define itself only in terms provided by the liberal order. St. Paul did not want the Corinthian church to be conformed to the world. We still need to heed that admonition.

In the Name of the Father...