

AMERICAN IDOLS

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.' They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel. The LORD said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"' "The LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.' But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, 'O LORD, why does

your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever." "And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

(Exodus 32:1-14, NRSV)

Abe sat flipping channels. There wasn't much on. He stopped when he saw a commercial for the BMW Z4. Now that was the car for him. He had sat there so many times and watched the other traders pull into the parking deck in their beautiful cars; most of them cost three times the Toyota he had now. He'd made some good deals lately and the money was finally there. He could just see himself pulling in beside them driving his Z4.

The commercial ended and Abe watched the news come on—more stuff about the hurricane aftermath: people without homes, children crying, businesses ruined. What had they said at church?

Some kind of offering to help these people? Now some talking head was going on about poverty in America. Abe switched the channel. Still nothing on. Wasn't the church doing something involving collecting food for some soup kitchen? There's the commercial again! A red Z4! It would have to be red. That would really stand out in the parking deck. He couldn't wait to get that car.

An idol is something you worship, something that represents what you center your life around. We've watered down the term in our culture and use it to refer to pop stars and celebrities. When we think of the word "idol" as it is used in the Bible it may bring to mind something an archaeologist digs up or maybe Indiana Jones grabs out of a booby-trapped tomb. Yet, throughout the Bible there is a theme of humanity turning its back on the one that created it and worshipping idols. When we read carefully, we find that idols do not have to be things made of stone or precious metals. An idol is anything to which we give the love and attention that rightly belongs to God.

It is interesting that in our scripture passage today the people of Israel make their God out of their jewelry and treasure. Makes sense doesn't it? Yet our idols are not always material. They are often more subtle.

Sarah looked at the picture of her mother and herself on the beach. It was a lovely picture—a mother and daughter playing together with the ocean behind them. That's why she kept it out on the

mantle for others to see. It was beautiful after all.

Yet, when Sarah looked at it something always twisted inside of her. The scene captured in that photograph wasn't real. Oh, she and her mother had played on the beach that day and probably had fun, but the picture did not represent their relationship. Her mother had rarely said a kind word to her. Instead, she received criticism and biting sarcasm. "Sarah, you look like a fool in that dress." "Sarah, why are you so stupid?" "Sarah, I can't believe you're my daughter."

Sarah felt all the time like a pot about to boil. The anger inside of her never seemed far away from her own mouth. When she talked to her own daughter, she often heard her mother's words escape her lips. Why couldn't things have been like in that picture of the two of them on the beach? What picture would her own daughter look at when she grew up? She prayed that God would make her a better mother, but she felt that she really was a fool.

The Bible begins with the message that we are created in the image of God and God declares that we are "very good." By worshipping God, placing God at the center of our lives, of our attention, of our priorities, it's as if we hold up a mirror to ourselves. By recognizing the one who created us, we are reminded of our own self worth—that we are created in the image of God and have intrinsic value. When we center our

lives around something else, our self-image is distorted and we forget who we really are. Even when our idols are not entirely of our own making, not born of selfishness alone but also pain, our self-understanding is distorted and like the people of Israel lost in the wilderness we too are lost.

Joe and Mary sat silently, each reading a magazine. Mary thumbed once again through her fashion magazine. There was another fundraiser coming up, this time at an art museum. She needed a new dress and wondered what designer she would pick this time. She had to pick carefully otherwise she'd be the subject of the whispers and snide giggles among the other women at the club. Sometimes she got so tired of having to be on guard against the knowing glances and rolled eyes. "Look who gained weight." "Guess who got some work done?" She wondered why she even cared what they thought when she didn't like them anyway. She felt lost. She remembered hearing at church once—it must have been when they took the kids to Sunday School—about Jesus being like a shepherd looking for lost sheep. That's what she was like—a lost sheep.

Joe picked through his own magazine and glanced over the latest tips for a better swing and the ads for the newest pitching wedges. He had a lot more time for golf now that the kids were at college. He thought that when he'd have more time to himself that he'd feel more peaceful, but he felt sort of empty. He

had always worked so hard to provide the very best for his family—a good home, the best clothes, vacations, cars, good schools. Yet he hardly knew his kids and barely talked to his wife anymore. He wasn't sure if he knew himself. He remembered when he and his wife had exchanged vows in their church. It was such a special and sacred moment. He also remembered when each of his children were baptized. These too were sacred. Why couldn't he have more times like that now? Hadn't he done all the right things? Then why did he feel hollow inside, like something was missing? He didn't know what to do, so he continued to look at his magazine.

We find at the end of the scripture passage a fascinating scene. God responds to the people's idolatry with anger and sounds like a spurned lover bent on revenge. Moses has to talk God down and remind God of God's promises to Israel. We may cringe at this picture of an all-too-human God, yet I feel this depiction of God is a gift. It lets us know how much God cares for us and how wounded God is when we turn away and offer our love to something else. It also introduces a theme found throughout the Bible of God choosing not to respond to our rejection of our Creator with punishment but with yet another attempt to win us over with love, mercy and grace.

Each of us has an altar in our hearts where we place the things most dear to us. On that altar there is a place meant only for God that we routinely fill with other less worthy things: wealth and status, bitterness and anger, lives spent chasing after emptiness. Yet, God responds to us with grace and forgiveness and still more love. We are left in the

position of having to choose whether we will allow God to be at the center of our lives or if we will bow down before yet another idol.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Oh God our Creator, our souls can find completeness only in you, but we look everywhere else but to you for meaning and fulfillment. Forgive us when we bow down before idols of materialism, bitterness, selfishness, and even the pursuit of good things that nonetheless were not meant to take your place. Guide our hearts back to you, so that we can be reminded that you are the one that created us and only in you will we find our true self-worth. Amen.