

24th Sunday Ordinary Time
September 12, 2010
Fr. Tom Elliott

Our Idols

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14
Psalm 51
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

The Israelites sure loved their idols! As with so many of the Old Testament stories, our first reading today tells us about the Israelites' love of idols. But, what is an idol? I looked up the word in the dictionary and it said that an idol is a "false god." What is a false god, then? It's any material object, person, or thought that becomes the source, rather than the instrument, of something that should have its source in the One True God. In other words, when we try to find the gifts of God—peace, consolation, contentment, hope, love, etc.—in things, people, or thoughts, then they become false gods, idols.

Often, it is not that our idols are bad, in and of themselves, but rather, we have made them stumbling blocks in our relationship with God by expecting them to offer us things that should only come from God. Saint Ignatius of Loyola explains this in his Principle and Foundation when he says—

All the things in this world are gifts of God,
presented to us so that we can know God more easily
and make a return of love more readily.
As a result, we appreciate and use all these gifts of God
insofar as they help us develop as loving persons.
But if any of these gifts become the center of our lives,
they displace God and so hinder our growth toward our goal.
-paraphrased by David L. Fleming, S.J

For more than two and half years, parishioners have been asking me why I sold my motorcycle. My most popular answer has been that the sale helped pay for my pilgrimage to Italy, which is true. However, there was much more to my selling the bike than simply the money. Slowly, over the course of several years, God has been inviting me to let go of the idols in my life. My motorcycle was an idol, so was my music. They weren't bad, in and of themselves, but I frequently turned to them for consolation rather than turning to God. Instead of turning to God when I was sad, lonely, tired, etc., I turned to my motorcycle, my music, or any other number of hobbies that I approached, not with gentleness, but often with a zeal that bordered on violence. Therefore, God slowly and *lovingly* stripped these things from me. He did it in a way that did not cause severe pain or sadness. He did it in a way that invited me to find consolation in Him instead.

I really didn't fully understand what God had been doing for the last few years until a couple weeks ago, as I was preparing to leave for vacation. During prayer one morning, I felt like God told me not to expect my vacation to bring me rest and renewal. I was shocked and appalled! I DID expect my vacation to bring me rest and renewal! Isn't that what vacations are

for?! How could God tell me not to expect such a thing? Then I realized that even a vacation can become an idol. I was trusting that my vacation would give me something that God Himself wanted to give me. Obviously, vacations are not bad, in and of themselves, but when we expect them to do something for us that only God can do, they become idols.

God does not want us to have any idols. He wants to be *everything* for us. He wants us to trust completely in Him. Sacred Scripture proclaims this message over and over. In the Book of Hosea God explains His love for His people, saying, “I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart” (Hosea 2:16). The desert is a symbol of emptiness. There is *nothing* in the desert; it’s complete poverty. It is *there* that God desires to intimately speak to His people’s hearts. While we are *outside* the desert, surrounded by all of our idols—all of the things we trust in and take consolation in—we cannot hear God speak to our hearts. So God invites us into the desert, into a place of poverty where we let go of our idols, so that we can experience intimacy with Him; so that He can be everything for us. This is the same type of poverty and intimacy that Jesus called His disciples to in the Gospels.

When Jesus sent His disciples out to begin their public ministry, He instructed them to “take nothing for the journey, neither walking stick, nor sack, nor food, nor money, and let no one take a second tunic” (Luke 9:2). Why? It was so that they would not trust in what they had, but in God. A person’s willingness to find consolation in God alone is the mark of authentic discipleship as opposed to a mere curiosity about Jesus Christ. We see this clearly in the Gospel of John, chapter six. Jesus had been teaching something very difficult to understand and even more difficult to accept. We are told that many in the crowd responded to Jesus’ teaching by saying, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him” (John 6:60, 66).

Those people in the crowd had come to a decisive moment; a moment of needing to make a radical decision of trust and obedience. Like a Like a trapeze artist, they found themselves being asked to let go of the first rope and become suspended in midair with nothing to hold on to but their trust in God. Yet, they decided to hold onto what they knew, their former ways of life, their idols.

Simon Peter, however, responded in a different way than the others in the crowd. He made a radical statement of trust and obedience. He let go of what was comfortable and familiar and told Jesus, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). This is the response that Christ requires of His followers. We must move beyond our mere curiosity about Jesus, let go of our idols, and let God lead us to a spiritual place where we can say, “God, there is no other place to go, but You.”

Where do you go when you need consolation, peace, love, comfort, acceptance, etc.? Is it to a favorite sin or addiction? Is it to food, a novel, a hobby, work, or exercise? What are the idols in our lives? How is God calling us to trust completely in Him and be obedient only to Him? Are we willing to let go of the things that don’t simply point to the God, but have become sources of consolation themselves?

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read Matthew 19:16-22. Jesus response to the man speaks of radical poverty, emptiness. This is a very common theme in Jesus’ teachings. It is a poverty beyond money. It is a detachment from all idols. What are some of the idols that you currently turn to for peace, contentment, consolation, happiness, love, acceptance, etc.?