

08/28/2022 Sermon: Top Priority

If I were to ask you what the top priorities are in your life, what would you tell me? Our family, our friends, our health and happiness, our careers, our finances, preparing for retirement, pursuing our passions and interests?

When we reflect on our priorities in our day to day life we often begin to think about the realities of our daily needs. We invest our time, energy, and resources into ensuring our priorities' needs are met. And only met, but that they excel far beyond our initial expectations.

The founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, created a model of priority that he thought when followed enabled humanity to reach our fullest potential in our faith. This model can be depicted by a target, and by maturing our faith level by level we strengthen our faith and begin to give ourselves more fully to God. The outer ring tells us to share love for our fellow Christians. As we work our way inward we see that we are called to practice works of piety. This includes spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, the reading of scripture, and Eucharist/communion. Next are works of mercy. This includes helping those in need through the ministries of the church. Food pantries, clothing closets, case workers, etc. The second from the center we see this thing called Holy Tempers, and best way we can describe this layer is the way we structure our virtues or our attitudes. How are our minds, our hearts, our bodies, and our souls working towards glorifying God? We have to ask ourselves not only how are my actions proclaiming to peace and love of God, but how are my thoughts and morals working towards that same goal? And at the center we simply read, Love. The love of God and neighbor as oneself. A

love that not only prioritizes the needs of ourselves, but a love that seeks to prioritize the love we share to one another, a love that reflects the grace that God has gifted us.

So, the first question we might ask ourselves about today's scripture is how do idols play a role in our lives today? After all we're talking about idols in a room full of practicing Christians! Not only are idols deemed unacceptable in the Ten Commandments given from God to Moses, but Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, reminded his disciples in John 14:6 "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Our modern context may convince itself that idols were a problem in ancient times, and the solution for that problem came through the life of Jesus Christ. However, just for moment, let's zoom out and take a look at the state of our American society today.

When we think about idols in regard to our scripture passage today, we may think about the golden calf. Quite humorously, in Exodus 32, after the ancient Israelites had already received these commandments from God, we read these words:

"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 the gold rings from their ears and through them to Aaron..."

Do we think about different accounts of idols? Some artifacts of idol worship date far beyond the dates given to our texts today.

Do we think about other accounts of idol worship in the Hebrew Bible like Molech? In Leviticus 20 we are told the penalties for violation of holiness by sacrificing one's offspring to Molech. The penalties of this violation being put to death by stoning.

Or, if we talk about the narrative of Exodus it might make sense for us to think about the Egyptians worshipping their various gods. After all the ancient Israelites spent many years in slavery within a context that worshipped specific gods for specific reasons.

Now, I'll ask you again, what are the idols of our modern context today?

Is it our societies infatuation with money? The seemingly endless pursuit of acquiring more and more wealth all while our culture sees a growing population of people who struggle to make ends meet.

Is it the growing obsession with technology that continuously pulls our attention away from the here and now, and into an entirely online world. I find it necessary to point out that this gift of technology makes our wide world ever so interconnected online, but also gives people the power to cater the information they receive from the outside world which constructs a narrow perspective filled by biases.

Perhaps idols exist in this world as excess. It's no secret that the world's perspective on American consumer culture continues to construct negative viewpoints on our society. An article from the USDA ERS calculated that Americans spent over 2.12 trillion dollars on food alone in

the year 2021. In case you're wondering, that amount of money is enough to give everyone on the planet \$275. And yet, there are entire nations that struggle to produce enough food to feed their population. Over 2 trillion dollars were spent in America all while there are over 6,500 active food deserts in the United States alone. Over 30% of Kansas citizens, that's 800,000 people in our communities, do not have access to healthful foods.

Perhaps the biggest pill to swallow is that our own families can negatively impact our relationship with God. It is a right and just instinct to prioritize our families and their needs, it is entirely natural to host protective instincts for those we consider family. But just like any other priority we hold in our lives; it can become a barrier in our faith if it turns us away opportunities to build our faith and community with God.

Idols exist in our world today, and just like the ancient Israelites in our scripture passage, we struggle to get on the path that seeks to glorify God and build up our faith. I would argue no one is exempt from these trials of life. There are many different points in our lives that we are forced to reevaluate our situation, make a list of what are priorities are, make life-changing decisions, and plan for our long-term futures. I am no different from anyone else in our positions. I have had to seriously consider what my priorities are as I traverse through life. There are finances to consider, education to complete, relationships to maintain (or discontinue), lifestyle choices I had to solidify or give up in order to take care of my family. And y'all, I would be a bold faced liar if I told you that I haven't struggled with the idols in my life. The things I hold as important that also serve as a barrier between me, my faith, and my calling to glorify God in all that I do.

I for one hold no shame in saying that there is much work to be done in my own life. A large part of spiritual growth throughout seminary is reflecting inward on who I am as a child of God. Not only is seminary a place where people are challenged to educate themselves about topics like scripture, tradition, and doctrine, but they are challenged to deconstruct the very essence of who they are and what they are being called to do. And here's the real kicker, I am NO DIFFERENT from you, and you are NO DIFFERENT from me. You see we read these words in Exodus 20 that tells us, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." And while we may not be able to identify closely with the imagery of being trapped in bondage against our will, I make the point that all of the idols in our lives truly makes us a slave unto ourselves. The choices we make, the intentions of our hearts, our minds, our body, and our soul dictates how capable we are to feeling to presence of God.

Much like God leading the Israelites out of Egypt, God has given us the opportunities to release ourselves from the bondage we created. In verse 4-5 we read, "You shall not make for yourself and idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me." Now, verse 5 can be polarizing for its readers because of its use of the term "jealous God." People, especially non or nominally religious people, ask themselves, "Well if God is all knowing and all powerful, the one true God, then why would They be jealous over the actions of humanity?" Well, I'm glad you asked!

The Hebrew word used for “jealous God” is *el-qanna*. Scholars often debate how these words operate in the text and just how our English translations ought to translate these words. Hebrew scholar Lemontte M. Luker argues what our English translation scribe as “jealous” could be best substituted for the word zeal. Lemontte adds to this by saying, “Expression of zeal can be a good thing, we zeal is directed appropriately, or it can become sin if the motivation for the zeal is misguided. For example, Saul tried to wipe out the Gibeonites in his zeal for his own people (2 Sam 21:2), but God regarded his zeal as misdirected, the cause of famine.” Much like a loving parent, God keeps a watchful eye on our actions and intentions, and when we place barriers between us, God recognizes that zeal as misdirected. This point is reinforced in verse 6 when we read “but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

If we go back to John Wesley’s model of faith we can now begin to contextualize what he means by “Holy Tempers,” – our intentions and virtues. One might describe Wesley’s depiction of Holy Tempers as us walking across a tight rope. As we stand on that rope we balance two opposing sides of a stick. As we slowly make our way across the rope we add to either side of our stick good or bad tempers of the heart. The good tempers of the heart are added to one side while bad tempers are added to the other. Through our journey on this tight rope our virtues and intentions are added to their respective side. These sides are held in tension as we struggle in the middle to find a balance that allows us to stay balanced on the rope. The longer we travel on this rope the more tempers are added on either side of us, and the pressure to find a balance continues to put more and more strain on us until we eventually lose balance. Our attempts to find the right balance between the commandments God has given us and the idols we

created for ourselves leads us to fall. And much like the Israelites, we fall again and again and again.

This circus act we perform can ultimately be simplified given the right actions and intentions. What if instead of a trying to balance the holy and bad tempers in our lives we simply got rid of the overwhelming weight our idols cause us. What if we were able to eliminate the idols we have placed in our lives and put our intensions and virtues towards one common goal: aim all of our intensions and virtues towards glorifying God. Think of how much more time, how much more energy, and how much more resources we could place into glorifying God if we eliminated these barriers from our lives. In the midst of all that has been said this morning, there is one aspect that remains universal, and it's this: God's grace and love for us remains unwavered regardless of our actions, intentions, or virtues. You see we are the only ones effected by our own intensions, virtues, and actions. We witness the byproducts of our action and our inaction. Our ability to place God at the center of our lives, and the reality of our idols being lifted up instead. The pain and suffering we see in the world is directly linked to humanities inability to place God at the center of our lives, put all of our intensions and virtues into the love and grace of God that seeks to eliminate pain and suffering. And where is God in all of this? God's presence surrounds us in all that we do. God's love for us rises above our action and inaction. God's love for Their creation is universal, even when we prioritize the idols in our lives over God.

The task that has been set before us is a daunting one. We are called to remove these idols from our lives, these behaviors, activities, and idealizations are the barriers that only serve to

prevent us from giving ourselves fully to God. These same barriers shade our eyes for the beauty of God's love around us. The idols that are prioritized over God give birth to a flurry of social injustices that we bear witness to today. But ever so slowly, we can begin to change ourselves, listen to God's call, and prioritize God in our lives. We can begin to address the injustices in our communities. We can anchor our actions in these Holy Tempers that glorify God and Their commandments. For the Lord our God once led us out of slavery, and they will continue to liberate us from the chains we have created for ourselves.

Amen.