



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

WHEN IN ATHENS

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ MAY 14, 2023

All my kids are becoming avid readers for which I am grateful. My oldest, Lucy, has always had a love for books. She is the type of kid who, in the morning when she is getting ready, will have a book pressed open between her feet while she is tying her shoes trying to squeeze in every last paragraph she can. She reads voraciously! Now 11 years old, she is at the age where I need to start recommending good literature to her because, on occasion, she has asked me a question that arose from something she has been reading and it will give me pause. So a couple of months ago I started reading and rereading some classic literature from renowned Christian authors like C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien to give her some book ideas. I started reading Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* which I had not previously read figuring that since it is a long series, I could give it to Lucy, and it would keep her busy for at least a day or two!

In the first book of the trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the main character Frodo, finds himself in possession of the Ring of Power, a ring forged by the Dark Lord, Sauron, the story's antagonist. Here is the problem. Because it was cast by the Dark Lord, the ring has the dreadful ability to corrupt everyone who possesses it, by taking the heart's fondest desires and magnifying them so that a person will do anything in his or her power to achieve those dreams, anything at all. Pastor Tim Keller, reflecting on Tolkien's masterpiece in his own book, *Counterfeit Gods*, writes, "[The Ring of Power] turns the good thing into an absolute that overturns every other allegiance or value."

For Keller, this becomes a working definition of *idolatry*. Idolatry is turning a good thing into an ultimate thing. Anything that becomes "more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your

heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give” you becomes an idol. If our careers, relationships, money, possessions, health, beauty, pleasure, or achievement become an end in and of themselves, and if we believe through them we will find meaning, happiness, or satisfaction, they become an idol. Simply put, an idol is anything about which you would say, “If I just had, (fill in the blank), I would be happy.” Conversely, you could get to the heart of idolatry by finding the thing that if you lost, you would be crushed.

John Calvin once famously observed that the human heart, “is a perpetual factory of idols.” Where idols of the ancient world were on prominent display—imagine physical statues carved or cast by human hands—idols of the heart are easier to conceal. It is important to have this nuanced sense of idolatry as we explore our text from God’s Word today so we can translate the physical idols displayed in the text into our own battle against the idolatry of the human heart.

Background

Our text this morning comes from the book of Acts, where following a thrilling encounter with the risen Christ that bent the whole trajectory of his life, the Apostle Paul took several missionary journeys around the Mediterranean Sea to become God’s witness to the Gentiles. On his second missionary journey, he and one of his missionary partners, Silas, departed from Antioch and traveled through Lystra where they picked up a young man named Timothy. Together they intended to set course for Ephesus in Asia Minor (a.k.a. modern-day Turkey). However, the Lord prevented them from heading to Asia. The missionary trio paused in Troas where Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come and help in Macedonia (a.k.a. modern-day Greece). Accordingly, Paul, Silas, and Timothy set off across the northern Aegean Sea for Macedonia. They traveled through Philippi where they converted a very influential ministry supporter by the name of Lydia. All seemed to be going quite well.

Then things began to change. In Philippi, Paul abruptly cast out

an evil spirit from a fortune teller. She had made some powerful men a lot of money as a soothsayer, and in retribution the men who had peddled her services had Paul arrested and thrown in prison. When Paul mentioned to his captors that he was a Roman citizen, he was quickly released and traveled on to Thessalonica where he faced more challenges. Some rabble in Thessalonica did not like what they heard, so they chased Paul and his companions out of town. The trio continued to Berea where the Gospel was well received. The Bereans consulted their scriptures to confirm what they were hearing. However, a crowd from Thessalonica heard about their work and showed up to forcefully usher Paul out of town toward the coast and drop him in Athens. In the process, Paul was separated from his ministry partners, Silas and Timothy.

While he was waiting for them to arrive in Athens, Paul, who was seemingly never idle, began to observe all the idols that pervaded the city. That is where we pick up our scripture passage from Acts 17:16-20, 22-31 (NIV). Hear now the word of the Lord.

While Paul was waiting for them [Silas and Timothy] in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean."

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with

this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

²⁹“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Interpretation

Paul lived by the words Pastor Steve quoted last week in his excellent meditation on wisdom—where Paul encourages us to make the most of the time. Rather than scrolling through Facebook while he waited for his companions to arrive in Athens, Paul did what missionaries do, he explored the culture of the people. The city of Athens during the time of Paul, though it had dulled somewhat from its zenith, still basked in its former glory as the center of art, philosophy, literature, and culture of the ancient world. It was the city Socrates and Plato called home. It was the adoptive city of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno. So renowned was Athens that in consideration of its past, when the Romans conquered the known world, they gave Athens freedom to maintain their own institutions, something they

did not readily offer! Echoes of this splendid past still reverberate today. Some of you may have visited Athens and seen the colonnaded Parthenon, a.k.a. the temple of Athena, located atop the Acropolis. Or perhaps you have visited the Temple of Olympian Zeus. If modern-day Athens is still impressive and at least partially so because of the temples to the idols of Zeus and Athena, imagine what it would have been like during the first century.

During Paul's day, it was a city riddled with idols, so much so that it has been said if you walked through ancient Athens, you were more likely to run into an idol than a person. I envision ancient Athens as I had imagined southwest Florida before calling it home. Before moving here, given the proximity to the Everglades and because someone told me there were more alligators than people in South Florida, I expected to run into more alligators than people. It turned out my friend had overestimated—not only because 1,200 people are moving to Florida every single day but because they are not bringing alligators with them! The description of Athens may be hyperbolic, but there were idols everywhere and Paul took notice.

Paul was steeped in Jewish thought and zealous for God. He was well aware of the first of the Ten Commandments, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything..." (Exodus 20:3-4a). In other words, Paul knew idolatry was strictly forbidden. So naturally, at the sight of all the temples and idols dedicated to pagan gods, verse 16 tells us Paul became greatly distressed. Wouldn't you? Imagine growing up in a cultural atmosphere where faith in a monotheistic God was core to your identity, and though not perfect, your people's collective sense of identity. Then one day you wake up in a world that worships everything but God. A world that takes good things—like love and beauty and work and fun—and makes them ultimate things. How might you feel? Some might use the term distressed! Have you ever been distressed by idols?

For instance, while dining out, have you ever found yourself observing everyone around the table essentially ignoring each other

and silently staring at a glowing box (cell phone) and remarked, "Back when I was a kid, this would never happen." Our glowing boxes so easily become the focal point of our gaze and reorient our priorities. If left unchecked the good things which take up our time, attention, and imagination, can become ultimate things. In fact, I read an article last week about a group of college students who became so addicted to the dopamine fix offered by their smartphones they knew they had to make a change. They threw out their smartphones and converted to what they call "dumb" phones. You know, the kind that flip open and closed and have no access to the internet. At first, this did not seem so newsworthy. However, they reported this decision on their social media accounts and now the phone manufacturer is shipping them boxes full of "dumb" phones and paying them to distribute them to their college friends. How easily our phones can capture our gaze and imaginations! We even tend to fold our hands around them and bow our heads before them. Sometimes we even talk to them and ask them for guidance or directions. What is even worse, we listen!

Last weekend I attempted to get directions to Eva's Closet to take some items to donate. I plugged the directions into my smartphone and confidently followed them until I turned down a dirt and sandy road and passed a sign stating, "Through Traffic Only." I continued for about a quarter of a mile until I realized, "I am going the wrong way!" Our little glowing boxes capture our time, attention, and imagination, and sometimes we even blindly follow them in faith. Are these good things becoming ultimate things? It is possible.

Or how about this? I think one of the other most significant idols currently is *self*. Today many operate under the conviction that their truest self can be found by searching within. Unlike Psalm 139 from our Call to Worship this morning, which invites God to search us and know us and test us, we seek to know ourselves apart from God, as if it were even possible. Once again, John Calvin writes at the very beginning of his magnum opus, Institutes of the Christian Religion, "without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self." Frankly, I am often distressed when I hear someone say they are "finding

themselves” because often I think what they mean is they are trying to live congruently with some inner impulse or feeling. Sometimes, but not always, this can come in the form of glorified self-indulgence or mere pleasure seeking. Ironically, this is not too dissimilar from the Epicureans of the time of Paul. At their worst, and at the worst of the Epicureans, a person’s pursuit of self-actualization might come through indulgence in alcohol or drugs.

The Jesus Revolution

A few weekends ago First Church hosted a First Flix event and showed the film, *Jesus Revolution*. My assessment is that next to *The Passion of the Christ*, *Jesus Revolution* may be the movie with the strongest evangelical Christian message I have seen. It is truly exceptional, and I commend it to your viewing pleasure. In case you have not yet seen the movie, which is based on a true story, here is the plot: Pastor Chuck Smith is the pastor of a small, conservative, southern California church and he is distressed by what he sees developing in the hippie culture of the 1970s. He has never met a hippie, and he is not interested in doing so. However, much to his chagrin, one day Pastor Chuck’s daughter brings home a charismatic hippie hitchhiker named Lonnie Frisbee who also happens to be a street evangelist. Pastor Chuck promptly ushers Lonnie out of their home and closes the door. After some convincing by his daughter, the two men sit down for a conversation and the ministry leaders could not contrast more. Pastor Chuck (played by Kelsey Grammer) is well-dressed, clean-cut, and proper. Lonnie looks like Jesus (in fact, he is played by Jonathan Roumie who portrays Jesus in *The Chosen* drama series). Lonnie has long hair and a long beard, and looks much like those who Pastor Chuck has been distressed by.

Their first interaction is awkward, to say the least. At one point in the conversation, Lonnie names the tension by saying, “I imagine that this is rather weird for you.” Shortly thereafter, Lonnie quotes Jesus, and as Pastor Chuck begins to hear the words of Jesus from the mouth of a man who looks conspicuously like Jesus, his heart begins to crack open. Lonnie says to Pastor Chuck, “If you look with

love, you will see a bunch of kids who are searching for all the right things, just in all the wrong places... they are sheep without a shepherd chasing after lies..." Then he quotes Romans 10 asking, "And how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard?" Something like scales fall from Pastor Chuck's eyes and he starts to see this group of people who have distressed him in a whole different light. Moved by the Spirit of God from being distressed by idol worship to having compassion for the lost sheep, Chuck and Lonnie go on to lead one of the greatest spiritual revivals in this last half-century.

I cannot help but envision this as being what happened to the Apostle Paul, who went from being distressed by idols to seeing the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers as sheep without a shepherd. Paul left the synagogues where he had been preaching and went out to the Areopagus—where the Stoics and the philosophers met—and began to share the hope he had found in the resurrected Jesus. Interestingly, he did not preach from the Jewish scriptures because his audience would not have understood them. Rather, he began to communicate the heart of the Gospel message to them from their own cultural perspective.

Both the Stoics and Epicureans represented alternative attempts outside Christianity to come to terms with life, especially in times of uncertainty and hardship. Paul had found some sheep who were searching for all the right things in all the wrong places. Instead of condemning them he looked upon them with eyes of love and began his speech with a compliment,

...I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. Acts 17:22-23

Today the term *ignorant* is often interpreted pejoratively, as though it were an insult. However, I do not believe this is how Paul's audience would have heard it here. Rather, for the Stoic and

Epicurean philosophers, life was a journey from vice to virtue. They believed that vice was the product of ignorance, and that virtue was discovered through knowledge. Therefore, Paul's use of *ignorant* was not a shot past the bow; he was beginning to speak their language. He was offering them knowledge which would lead to the virtue they were seeking. He states that, "I found an alter to an unknown god... this is the one to whom I'm going to introduce you" (Acts 17:23).

Paul then goes on to describe what God is like. First, he shares that God made everything including the earth, every people and culture, and that He remains in sovereign control over it all. Second, God created in us a longing for Him, a desire that we would reach out for Him and find Him, that He is not far from us. In contrast to the gods the Athenians worshiped, the One True God was not a distant creator who needed to be placated to find favor. Rather, this God is so concerned about the life of every human being that He took on flesh in Jesus Christ, died, and was raised from the dead. Jesus alone is the fulfillment of the longing in us for God—no idols, philosophy, worldly wisdom, pleasure, or any other good thing can take His place. Jesus is the ultimate good and should be the only object of our worship.

Third, Paul concludes that all the other idols were man searching for God. Now that Jesus has come to seek and save the lost, we have no excuse for idolatry.

Modern Idolatry

If an idol is a good thing that becomes an ultimate thing, and today there are idols of the heart, not graven images, they can be more difficult to spot. Our idols are what captivate us and ultimately hold us captive. The danger of our idols is they command our love, our trust, and our obedience. Whenever we direct our ultimate love toward anything other than God, we are committing spiritual adultery. When our first love is not God, we are making something other than God the ultimate love of our lives. Likewise, when we place our trust in anything other than God or when we serve anything other

than God, we are making good things ultimate things and thereby deifying them.

There are two implications of this text today—two takeaways. First, we are invited to look at what commands our love, trust, and obedience. What in this world are we relying on for meaning and satisfaction that is becoming our ultimate god? Though Paul spoke the language of the people, and he even began with a compliment, he made it clear at the end that because of what has been done for us in Christ, we are left without excuse. We must turn from the idols of our hearts, and to be candid, we all have them.

The second truth we can discern from the text today is not only that we have been idolatrous, but we must look differently at those who are far from the Lord. It is natural for Christians to be distressed when we encounter idolatry. In fact, it may be quite good! What is less natural is to recognize idolatry for what it is; to experience feeling distressed and yet to follow after our Lord. Luke tells us He came to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10, NIV), and He “had compassion...because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). In Christ, God demonstrated His great love in this: while we were idolatrous enemies of God, God sent Jesus to reconcile us to Himself. This is the love that compelled Paul to overcome his aversion to the idols of Athens and communicate the Gospel to those who were far from the Lord. And this is the Love that compels us. We must learn to look through the eyes of love to seek those who are looking for all the right things in all the wrong places. We must learn to love them enough to communicate the message of Jesus in the language they can understand.

I’ll close with this. There was another church in southern California where one Sunday morning a man who appeared to be homeless—he was wearing clothes which were dirty, no shoes and had long, disheveled hair and a matted beard—entered the sanctuary during the sermon and walked all the way down the center aisle to the front where he sat on the floor. To say that the congregation became distressed was an understatement. About the time people could take no

more, one of the leaders of the church, a well-respected and well-dressed elder of the church, stood up, grabbed his cane, and slowly made his way to the front of the room. Many in the congregation breathed a sigh of relief because finally, someone was going to do something. When the elder arrived at the front where the stranger was sitting, with great personal effort, the church leader sat down next to the visitor. This was a man who understood that at times, as Christians, we need to push through our feelings of being distressed to build a bridge for the Gospel.

Who is the person in your life who has left you feeling distressed? Do you have a face in mind? What are they seeking? How can you direct that search to its rightful fulfillment? They are searching for Jesus for whom God has created us to long. ■



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9751 Bonita Beach Road | Bonita Springs, Florida 34135 | 239 992 3233 | fpcbonita.org