

The Ultimate Iconoclast

Michael Jenkins

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

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This morning I want to invite you for just a moment, into my favorite sacred space in the whole wide world, Durham Cathedral in Northeastern England. It is a masterpiece of Norman craftsmanship. The Romanesque darkness of the interior is broken only by long shafts of light filtered through the narrow windows of ancient glass. Monumental columns in their carved patterns disappear up into the ceiling far above. The sanctuary invites, no, demands, silence.

There's this thick sense of a thousand years of the presence of the holy resting within these stones as the self-torturing world spins without. The motes dancing in the streams of sunlight upon air infused by centuries of incense is a kind of sensual metaphor for our own existence suspended upon the breath of God.

There is something, however, that mars the beauty within the cathedral. And, sadly, it is the handiwork of a branch of our own spiritual ancestors.

When Oliver Cromwell and his army of Protestant Roundheads stormed northward across Britain to subdue Christians practicing any form of Christianity they deemed inappropriate, Cromwell's army billeted their horses in this holy place. And, for fun as much as from religious zeal, his army, which saw itself as engaged in a holy war, destroyed every image of every saint they could find, every depiction of Christ, even defacing the effigies of the dead on the carved tombs that line the nave of the cathedral.

What many of us would consider sacrilege, they proudly called iconoclasm, literally "image breaking." They believed they were acting in the cause of the First Commandment, not to make an image of anything in heaven or on earth.

They believed they were acting in the name of God against idolatry. They did not discern that their actions were, in fact, an expression of their own idolatry; having crafted a small god in their own image, they set out to attack any gods that didn't look like them and didn't share their prejudices.

The First Commandment can be tricky not only to obey, but to discern.

When I was a young preacher, my first assignment out of college was to serve as the pastor of a tiny church on the vast, dusty, flat, brown prairies of West Texas. To protect the guilty and the innocent I shall refrain from naming the little church. They were good people, God-fearing folks. God-fearing to a fault, we might almost say.

I was standing out in front of the church one day, on the sandy soil that served as our parking lot, talking with a group of the men. One of them wanted me to notice a particular feature of the church building of which they were especially proud, the ornament atop the steeple.

The men explained to me that when they put the steeple up, it didn't look finished. They felt it needed something more, but if they put a weathercock on it, that didn't feel right, having an image up there of a rooster; and a cross on the top of the steeple, they said, would look Catholic. It was a pious quandary for them.

One of the men, they told me, got this great idea. He said leave it to me. And the next time they came to church the people saw a simple ball-like structure shining in the sun on top of the steeple. When the other fellows asked the craftsman how he came up with it, he proudly explained, "I went down to the hardware store, bought a toilet float, painted that sucker gold, and there it is."

The men proudly pointed to it so I could behold the glory of their Protestant ingenuity. There it was, a humble device of bathroom plumbing on the steeple of their church, but at least it didn't look Catholic.

The issues of idolatry and iconoclasm and the challenges of understanding the First Commandment may have something in common and something to say to us today as we observe World Communion Sunday, when Christians around the globe celebrate in their own ways the simple meal that was intended by Christ to demonstrate our unity, but has become one of the most common demonstrations of our divisions.

The primary effect of iconoclasm throughout the ages has been to insure that Christians sort themselves into different and often opposing groups.

The Eastern Church and the Western Church split from each other over a single clause in the creed (the *filioque* phrase; no need to go into that today) and the issue of images and idols. The Western Church allowed statues, the Eastern Church permitted only pictures, icons. But like Cromwell's zealous vandals, or the deacons in my first little church, they had missed the much larger, though less literal, point of the First Commandment.

God, himself, according to C. S. Lewis, is "the Great Iconoclast." He breaks every image. He resists our attempts to pin him down, to demand that he look like us, or like the things we adore in this world.

God is eternally that Being within being, the Holy and Wholly Other, the Resident Alien in all that is, the Sacred Presence even in absence, the Creator who never stops creating, the Unnameable, the Unknowable: and it is he, God, who will break every image our minds conceive of to limit him. And it is God who has brought us out of bondage, and has delivered us into the desert, on a journey to that place where we belong.

The religious impulse, which often includes the powerful inclination to make artistic objects that assist us in prayer and meditation and contemplation of the invisible God, is not to be confused with the idolatrous impulse to worship some “thing” instead of God.

The religious impulse can lead a human artist or artisan to craft from a block of marble something as sublime as the Pieta sculpture or as tacky as the plastic Jesus whose eyes follow us around the room. The literalist in us may have contempt for the one and make a joke of the other, but neither representation has necessarily anything to do with idols.

Idolatry is another matter altogether. And avoiding idolatry takes more imagination and moral courage than simply breaking statues.

The theologian and ethicist, Reinhold Niebuhr, whose influence in the mid-twentieth century extended from the U. S. Department of State to the most humble mid-western pulpit, described idolatry in rather high-flown philosophical terms, but the reality to which he pointed was practical and down to earth. Please bear with me for a moment as I tease out what he said.

Niebuhr argued that we commit idolatry whenever we *“make some contingent and relative vitality into the unconditioned principle of meaning.”* He goes so far as to identify sin and idolatry as virtually the same. *“Sin is the vain imagination by which man hides the conditional, contingent and dependent character of his existence and seeks to give it the appearance of unconditioned reality.”*

What Niebuhr is saying is that we practice idolatry mostly when we aren’t being religious at all.

When we take something of relative value and give it ultimate or absolute value, we are committing idolatry. When we use the things around us to try to deny the fact that life is short, existence always changing, and the future not really in our control, we practice idolatry. Idolatry is a sort of ultimate denial of reality.

You might say idolatry is the sin of using that which we should only worship and worshipping that which is merely intended for use. That means that the thing we worship as an idol need not be a bad thing in itself. In fact, we tend to make most idols out of good things, not bad ones.

To reach back to last week’s sermon, the sin of idolatry is basically trying to make God useful, while worshipping the things around us that were meant to be used.

Maybe the best way to understand God’s commandment against the worship of false gods is to go back to the Reformer Martin Luther and the Catechism he wrote in the 1500s for new Christians. Commenting on the First Commandment, Luther asks the question, “What constitutes a god?” And his answer is: “Whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God: trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol.”

Of course, there’s a problem with all of this. Or maybe I should say there’s a point of real discomfort in all of this. You see it.

It takes God out of the sanctuary where we can keep him safely penned in and locked up, and it let's God loose in our world. It opens the door for God to invade every aspect of our lives, even the areas we entrust to other what shall we call them? powers, forces, gods.

We betray our thinking about whom we worship, and we reveal our own idolatry, every time we say (if only to ourselves), "What Jesus says in the sermon on the mount is all very well and good, but it's just nuts to do what he suggests." Or, "The love of God sounds fine in church, and I want my children to learn all about it, but I live in the real world, and I sure don't trust my family's future to love alone."

You know what I mean. We could go on and on with our internal recordings of idolatry.

I love the old translation of the Psalms (I think it's from Coverdale) where it says "*trust not in the strength of any man's legs.*" I love that. It's archaic, and it always brings a smile to my face just to recall. It's about power, whether on a battlefield, or on a trading floor, or in a court room, or in a board room, or in the political realm. "*Trust not in the strength of any man's legs.*"

Even something as good and useful as the "peds" that make us pedestrians can become idols if we place our trust in them.

Amen.