

Hosea 11:1-11
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

TODAY'S IDOLS

I'd like to start with a true story from someone's life:

A pastor was working on her sermon
while enjoying lunch at a local Chinese restaurant.

A short distance away were two 30-something women,
loudly engaged in trashing people...

When the waitress arrived,
one ordered a dish, adding, "No oil."

The Chinese waitress obviously did not speak English very well.

"No oil?" she asked with some confusion.

"No oil!" the woman answered, offering no further explanation.

This pointless question & answer game went back & forth,
until the customer finally said,

"Just tell them in the kitchen. They know: NO OIL!"

The waitress, very embarrassed, bowed and walked away.

While she was still within earshot,
the customer exploded in laughter
and her friend joined in.

"Omigod! Did you hear that? Omigod! omigod! omigod!"

TEN times she said it back to me.

TEN times, omigod! omigod!

I mean, God! 'No oil!' God!"

They returned to their gossip with renewed gusto.

When the waitress returned,

the customer flashed an arrogant smile and said, "No oil, right?"

The waitress, embarrassed again, bowed, "No oil, yes."

And again, before she was far from them,

the two women returned to mocking her,

"Omigod! omigod! NO OIL! I mean, God!"

The Holy Spirit grabbed the pastor and told her what to do.

She balked at first,

but finally, after paying her bill,

she stopped at their table.

"Excuse me, please," she said.

They looked up expectantly.

"You have been calling out to God over and over again,

at least *TWENTY* times,

so God sent me to ask you what you want."

The women were stunned.

The pastor waited for a torrent of insults and obscenities,

but it never came.

"God would like to know why you called him

and what you would like. Can I help you?"

The “no oil” woman, uncomfortable, looked away, saying,

“Well, I don’t know... I mean, we didn’t...”

The pastor continued,

“God has asked me to remind you

there is a commandment that says

Do not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.

That means, don’t use God’s name as an insult,

or as an ordinary exclamation

instead of ‘wow!’ or ‘can you believe it?’

or something like that.

When you say ‘omigod’,

God hears you calling and is ready to answer,

but he is insulted if you’re just throwing his name around

for no good reason.”

The pastor turned to the quieter woman.

“How would you feel if your friend started shouting *your* name

or throwing it around casually,

like it meant nothing?

God wants you to know he is always ready to listen to you—

but do not insult him.”

The two women were speechless

and profoundly uncomfortable.

What is so distressing about these women, I think,
is that they are like so many other people we encounter
or we know personally.

They think nothing of entertaining themselves
by trashing other people,
they think nothing of tossing God's name around
as if God didn't matter,
as if God weren't there.

They have forgotten that God is indeed present.

They have turned their own entertainment,
their own little moments of power
at the expense of other people,
into idols.

But when God speaks—
in this case through a pastor who acted as prophet—
they drop those worthless idols and realize
they themselves are unworthy before God.

We don't like to admit it, but we all have idols.

Even people of deep, committed faith.

Maybe it's those TV shows or sports events
we absolutely *have* to see every week—so much so
that even if someone we care about asks us to give it up just once,

to spend time with them doing something else,
we apologize but just can't bear to do without our weekly fix.
Maybe we feel we have to buy the latest and greatest
technological gadget—an electronic book, an iPad, a Blackberry,
a newer version of PhotoShop, or the latest interactive Wii program.
Maybe it's the need to haunt the mall or our favorite consignment shop
or Costco, BJ's, Target or Wal-Mart,
to get the best deals on things we really don't need
but want to have anyway.
Maybe it's a political, or social, or educational, or religious group
we belong to that is so compelling, so engaging,
that we lose ourselves in the topics at hand
and find ourselves neglecting other responsibilities.
All of these pursuits, when they become habits that own us
and eat up our time, energy and attention,
no matter how well-intentioned they may be,
they become *idols* because they take the place of God's guidance
and God's will for our lives.

The prophet Hosea was sent by God to speak painful truths
to God's people while they were being invaded by their enemies.
They were under attack by Assyria as punishment from God.
They had lost touch with God,

they had turned their backs on their Father in heaven
who had brought them out of bondage in Egypt,
who had blessed them with the promised land of milk and honey,
who had always been faithful to the covenant God made
with their ancestor Abraham and all the generations that followed.
Even as they have worshipped the false gods – the Baals –
of the neighboring populations, asking *them* for bigger harvests,
even though they have turned their backs on their Father in heaven,
the only true God, *still* God continues to love them,
to nurture them, to heal them and feed them, to teach them –
all the tender care a loving father gives his child.

Hosea tells them God is now declaring he sees
that his people are bent on turning away from him,
like rebellious teenagers who angrily insult their parents,
claiming their parents are ignorant and
can't possibly understand what their children are dealing with,
so they should just leave them alone and let them do what they want.

But as a loving Creator and Parent, God admits,

“How can I give you up?

How can I make you like Admah & Zeboiim,
entire cities that were destroyed and forgotten.

Even such an idea offends me,” declares God,

“my compassion for my children grows warm and tender.

It soothes the heat of my anger.

How could I destroy my own people just because they anger me
by rejecting me for idols?

I will not do this, because I am not like mortal humans,
I am God Almighty.

I come to you, my beloved children, as a loving Father,
not as one who is angry because you insulted me.

And because I am tender, compassionate,
loving and forgiving,

you *will* tear yourselves away from your idols
and come back into my arms once more."

This promise is for us, too.

Right now, right here.

No matter how much we may have offended God
by taking God's name in vain, by worshiping popular idols,
by spending money on ourselves instead of tithing to the church;
no matter how much we may have offended God
by neglecting to seek God in prayerful conversation,
or by tuning out God's whispers in our ear,
or by tending to *our* comforts and desires
instead of someone else's needs;

no matter how much we may have offended God

by simply forgetting that we are all brothers & sisters
in our Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore the children of God;
despite all our bad choices and bad behavior,
God banks the hot coals of his anger and reaches down
to cuddle each of us with the blessings of tender fatherly love.

As the Apostle Paul reminded the church in Corinth,
our faith in Christ should lead us to focus first and foremost
on the things of heaven, and to give up our old earthly ways.
Even if it means losing a friend or two,
Because, if they are unwilling to try to understand
our priorities and commitments, they are not really our friends.
The boundaries have changed because we are people of faith.
We are called now to reject the idols of our past,
and to embrace the ethical virtues taught and modeled for us
by Jesus.

It's no secret: we live in a supremely capitalistic culture,
where greed is encouraged constantly by advertising.
We are surrounded and bombarded by it every day:
billboards, TV and movie ads, magazine and newspaper ads,
enticing email offers, popup ads on the web
that are designed to distract us from our task to shopping online...

The Bible is *clear* that greed is idolatry —
as we read in Luke this morning,
when we focus on acquiring and protecting personal treasures,
we lose sight of what we should truly value.

When Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment,
do you remember what he said?
First and foremost is to love the Lord our God
with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.
And the second is to love our neighbor as much and in the same way
as we love ourselves.

An idol is a false god.
It's empty of value for our lives, our hearts, our minds
and our eternal souls—in fact, idols exist to tempt us away from God.
Let's be mindful of the dangers of temptation,
and respond instead with a joyful shout:

My God is faithful and true!

Jesus the Christ is my Savior and Lord.

The Holy Spirit lives in me and guides me.

From now on, I promise my faithful God that

I will listen for his guiding voice,

I will ask for and thank him for his daily blessings,

and I will serve him and my neighbors

*with the same energy and attention
I used to devote to pleasing myself.*

It's not easy, but it's worth making and keeping the commitment.

God does, because he loves us.

Don't we love God?

Let's pray:

Father God, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit,

we want to reject all the idols

that steal our attention and faithfulness from you,

you who made us, you who sustain us,

and you who love and bless us every day

no matter how much our choices may offend you.

Thank you for giving us new chances every day,

Like the ancient Israelites and the women in the Chinese restaurant.

We want to turn around, walk away from temptations,

give up greedy unfulfilling ways, and

dedicate ourselves anew to fulfilling our covenant promise

to always be your people, because *you* are *always* our God.

Help us to keep our promises to you.

In the name above all names we pray,

Amen.