CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

What's in Your Wallet? On Idols, Caesar's Coin, and Giving Ourselves to God

I have been a priest for more than 30 years. I got ordained in my late 20s, and I spent a lot of my time as a priest in different places. One of my favorite places that I had a posting was in New York City in the late 1990s. I was about three years into being a priest and, uh, when you're at a church in Greenwich Village, you develop an incredible database of people that come in and so many people would just kinda come into that church out of nowhere, and they would be looking for strong medicine.

Now, this was back in the day, in the late '90s, when Greenwich Village was Greenwich Village. It wasn't the incredible gated community it's become. It was this place where there was a lot of action, a lot of temptation, a lot of things were done, and things were said. We would have these people come in, and they would want to be right with God. They had had enough of whatever they had been doing, and they would come in looking for some kind of new life in their life. One of my favorite people who came in, who I think about constantly and I pray about, was a businessman named Ira.

He came in off the street, and he was amazing. He had this beautiful power suit on. I'm talking about the suits from the late 1990s. They were this incredible suit of armor made of felt and wool and all of those things. You know, suits these days are not the same. The suits that young men these days wear look like they're about three sizes too small.

Not Ira's suit. Ira's suit was beautiful, and then the tie- the tie was fantastic as well. He sat in my office, and he began to bellow out the F-bomb loudly. I don't wanna say it 'cause there are young ears, but it was like he would say, "Ugh." And then he would cover his mouth, and then he would weep.

Then he would say it again. People got a little bit concerned 'cause he was shouting the F-bomb so loudly. Staff would kind of cross in front of my door, peek in, and I was like, "It's okay. It's okay." After about 20 or 30 minutes, I'm not making this up, he said to me, "I have been struggling my entire life with deep loneliness and feeling rootless

and without any kind of faith, and I am ready to make a change in my life. I am ready to be changed. I, I've been walking past this church for years, and I just had this feeling that this is where I needed to be." And so I said, "Well, Ira, this is what we do in the Christian faith. We, we get baptized. We turn away from everything that is drawing us away from God. We renounce sin, death, and the devil, and we turn and accept Jesus as our, our, our life-giver, our liberator, and our Lord. That's what you do at baptism. Do you wanna do that?" And he said, "Yes." And on the day he was baptized, his family didn't show, and he was alone. My little community in Greenwich Village immediately jumped up and sponsored him and answered for him and supported him as he made this life-changing decision.

I will never forget this one moment where I realized that Ira's search for God was incredibly powerful. I was teaching the adult baptism class, and we had a lot of people who were trying to get their lives together with God, and they were at this class. We had about six of us, I suppose. And the other ones looked like they were about to, you know, maybe start a band in their garage in Seattle, you know. And then there was Ira, who was in a beautiful suit on a Sunday.

I tried to get some interaction between them, and so I said, "Well, like, what draws you from the love of God?" And someone raised their hand and said, "Sex." I said, "Okay." So I grabbed my dry-erase marker, I reached over, and I wrote up sex on the board, and I said, "What else?" And someone said, "Drugs." I said, "Okay. Right. We're cooking. Drugs." And then I said, "What else?" And then someone, you know, of course, said, "Rock and roll." And I turned around and I wrote rock and roll. And then Ira became impatient with this, and he raised his hand, and he said, "I'm sorry. I disagree." And I said, "Well, tell me. Why do you disagree?" He said, "I don't think that any of those things are sin or even evil or from the devil. I don't think sex is sin. I don't think drugs are sinful. I don't think rock and roll, certainly not rock and roll, is sinful. It's when those things become a god to me that they become sin to me. It's when those things claim me, and I have spent my life following those things, and I have found myself empty. And what I need to do is I need to reject those things as the idols they are."

As soon as he said that, I realized how powerful his search for God was and how powerful his insight was because truly that is the case. There is nothing wrong with sex. There is nothing wrong with drugs. There's nothing wrong with rock and roll. But all of us, when we turn away from the things that draw us from the love of God and turn towards Jesus, that is a step we have to take. That step is to reject the power that idols have in our lives.

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What is an idol? Martin Luther, the great Christian reformer, writes in his Larger Catechism that if you wanna know what an idol is, just ask yourself what your heart desires most. That will be your God or your idol. Idols are, for Luther, the generation of our desires. For others, idols are things that completely destroy our humanity. When we worship an idol, we are worshiping only a part rather than the whole. We're worshiping only something that should be a path on the way to the end, a means to an end rather than the end itself.

What is an idol? Everything in Christianity turns on our ability to name the idols in our life and to reject them, to name them, to unmask them, and to resist them, and to claim a living relationship with God. Now, all of our readings for today, in one way or another, speak about this fundamental claim that God makes upon us, and that claim expects us to reject the things that stand in the place of God, and that is what an idol is. In our reading from Isaiah, you have a moment. We're in the midst of telling the people of Israel that He is gonna be sending an appointed leader through the Persians to bring them back to the promised land. He says to them, "I am the Lord. There is no other besides me. There is no God." In our psalm, Psalm 96, "You find that, as for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols. It is the Lord who made the heavens." And in our reading from 1 Thessalonians, you have this beautiful line. Paul commends the people of Thessalonians that they have turned from idols to serve a living and true God. That turn from idolatry goes with the grain of our Judeo-Christian tradition. It is the fundamental insight.

In today's gospel, idolatry is at the crux of things. If you miss it, you miss everything in today's gospel. Why? Because you have perhaps heard people who will tell you about what this gospel means. There are people who will tell you that when Jesus said, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar and to God the things of, that are God's," that He was making a neat division that's gonna allow us to live our lives in the way that we can live them. You have to give some money to Caesar. You have to give some money to God." And oftentimes, I've heard this- maybe you have, it's often been couched in terms of giving money to the church, but that is not what today's gospel is about. It has nothing to do with somehow dividing up your life into the things you owe one party and not another. The key to today's gospel happens in the moment in which Jesus says to them, "What is on the coin that you're holding in your hand, the denarius?" He asked them, "Who is on the head? Whose head is it, and what is the title?" And I've given you an example of exactly that coin, not the same exact coin, but the mint of it, on your bulletin today.



A denarius here that was forged somewhere between the years 18 and 35. It was done in Lyon, France, and this was the only coin you could use to pay taxes to the emperor. And so you'll see on that exact coin, there is the inscription, the title, it goes to Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus. That coin that they produced to Jesus to give an example of what it means to pay taxes to the emperor, in other words, is the very definition of an idol. It's a total claim. The people who hold that coin and give that coin are acknowledging that the empire and that emperor are divinely instituted and are of God. When Jesus calls them on this, he's right to call them on this because they should not have been carrying that in the temple, which is where they were meeting. Jesus is lifting up to them that they were carrying that little bit of idolatry right into the temple because if they had been truly faithful, they would have changed the money outside the temple for a shekel, not a denarius. So Jesus in this gospel today is inviting his auditors, both the Pharisees and the Herodians, and us as his auditors to understand what it means to be enslaved to an idol. It's not just treating something subordinate as the end. It's not just running away with our desires. Idols have power in our lives, and it all has to be named, it all has to be unmasked, it all has to be resisted.

What is an idol? There are three things I wanna lift up in today's gospel that you need to see. The first thing that an idol does in your life is it limits you, and it bifurcates you, and it divides you, and it creates a binary between what is right and what is wrong. Everything else in the Scriptures points to the fact that our creation is good and is called to relationship with God. In Psalm twenty-four, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." But an idol will claim one part, and that part will pretend to be the whole.

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What is an idol? As you can see, idols can be the manifestation of great desires, but they can also be the manifestation of great fears. And that's because idol worship is contagious. When someone else is being called and somehow held captive to an idol, whether it be propriety or status or achievement or your place in the community or whether or not you get into a country club or whatever you do to try to create a hierarchy within your life, whenever you are doing that, that is often not just an exercise in desire. It's that you have seen that this is something others want, and you are held captive by it. That captivity is as much a product of fear as it is of love or desire.

Finally, and most importantly, Jesus invites his auditors to see that when you give your life to God, you find your full humanity. Idols always rob us of our humanity. When we are in right relationship with God, we find the humanity Jesus has prepared for us, that humanity that is full and right and in right relationship with God. Now, all of these things are important for us to consider at this time and this place. Yes, we are in the midst of a time in which we're gonna be making appeals to you as humbly as we know to tell the story of how many of us have come to this church and have been transformed by it, and we want you to fall in love with that story. We want you to see that in the self-offering of those stories, there is an image for your own path to giving to this church. But this is not simply an appeal to you for funds. We want you to be transformed spiritually by this whole process we call stewardship. This whole process is to be a way for you to be transformed. And now, having been a priest for more than thirty years, I will stand by that spiritual invitation before anything else.

If there is anything in you that is responding to a power of an idol in your life when you're giving to this church, I don't want you to give the money. If this gift is part of your transformation, if this gift is part of you claiming the humanity that is yours, if this gift is you believing in everything that we're doing as a church, then bring it on, and be transformed by the gift you give. The first step in any act of stewardship isn't finding out how much you can give. It's not figuring out whether or not the church deserves it. It's prayer. I'm inviting you today to pray with me to be changed by the next few weeks as we think together about all the stories of redemption.

Since coming here, I have seen many more stories than Ira's, and that story is powerful, but so are yours. To help us make a start with this, I'm gonna share with you a poem that I wrote that is a poem of self-dedication and a recognition of my own, my own struggles with idolatry.

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when I made you
into something I could hold in my hands,
you refused to be held
slipping my grasp
you held me with your mercy.

when I tried
to earn your acceptance
you left me with silence
ignoring my ambition
you asked only for my heart

when I walked
the labyrinth of my desires
you led me in circles
waiting for my restlessness
to end in surrender

when I filled
myself with knowledge
you covered yourself in mystery
waiting to fill
my emptiness with your love

when I ran
into the darkness
your light shined on my back,
waiting for me
to show you my face

when I sacrificed
my life on countless altars,
you refused my offering,
waiting until I had nothing
left to give but myself

you are a God who waits,
so that
lost

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i might find you
exhausted
i might rest in you
empty
i might be filled with you
broken,
I might learn compassion
reconciled
i might be made new

Give to God the things that are God's, says Jesus. This requires of us, first and foremost, an attitude of prayer. It requires, first and foremost, an understanding that stepping into relationship with a living God is something that calls all of us, no matter where we are, no matter who we are, into a relationship of transformation. May that be so for you today and always.

Amen.