



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Over the past week, there have been three questions that I've been asking myself, and so I'm going to ask them of you. Who do you worship? How do you worship? And what do you worship? These three questions kept on coming up in my mind as I was reading again and again our reading from Exodus today. Because as powerful as our reading is from Matthew, I found myself continually going to that passage from Exodus of the golden calf. It is the locus classicus of the sin of idolatry.

All of our readings, all of the traditions around it point to that passage as the kind of summary statement of what it means to fall prey to the sin of idolatry. And idolatry is often defined as placing something as God in your life that doesn't have a right to be God. Or making a graven image, a representation of God that is not God and getting confused. But over the past week, I've been reading about a 400-page book by a Jewish philosopher I admire, Moshe Halberstam, who is both a defender of human rights and a defender of Israel, and one of my favorite philosophers.

And Halberstam, in a powerful book that he wrote in 1995, said that idolatry had three dimensions, which I summarize by asking those questions: who do you worship? What do you worship? And how do you worship? Halberstam says that you can see all three operating in today's reading from Exodus. And just to summarize a little bit about this, it's one of my favorite pieces of scripture. The Israelites are impatient and anxious because Moses is up communing with God. And so they turn to Aaron, the priest, and they tell him to do something. And you know, if you read the scriptures, that anytime a priest gets involved, that something bad is going to happen.

And so Aaron kind of works and does his own thing, and he brings it out together. And he tells them to take off their earrings that they had gotten from the Egyptians, when they despoiled them as they were leaving Egypt and heading towards the Promised Land. And he says, give me the earrings and he melts them down and he makes this calf. And then he says to them, here O Israel, are your gods. Now, when you read this you think to yourself, no Aaron, that's my earring, not my God. But such was the anxiety of the people that when

***Who do you worship? What do you worship? How do you worship?  
- The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost***

they saw this graven image of a calf they began to worship it. And not only did they worship it, they created a whole new liturgy around it.

Now, Habertal argues that you can see three kinds of idolatry working through this passage. There's a moment of substitution where that calf, which was a representation of fertility and the seasons, stands in the place of a God who had acted in history. And so idolatry is that moment in which we get confused about the God we worship in terms of who that God is. That fundamental character of the God of Israel is not a God that visits us in times and seasons, but it's a God who intervenes on behalf of God's people when they are faced with peril.

And that act of substitution is its own kind of betrayal. When you read the scriptures, the way that idolatry is spoken of in the Bible is that it is a kind of betrayal and an infidelity. It is likened to the marriage covenant. It is like leaving your spouse or being unfaithful to your spouse or undermining your spouse. Such is idolatry. And so when we ask the question, who do you worship, this is a question for us about our faithfulness to God. It's an invitation for us to think about the nature of the God we worship. Is this a God who is truly other to us? Is this a God who intervenes in history and acts?

Anne Lamott famously wrote that if you are worshiping a god who completely agrees with everything you think and say and do, you have fallen into idolatry because that god will always be ahead of you and surprising you and revealing to you a new facet in his redemption of the world.

What do you worship? You see this as well in the passage because this, Habertal writes, is a kind of confusion of what he calls extension, but what I am going to summarize as a confusion between the means and the end. And that often hits us when it comes to money. And there is no coincidence that the calf is made of gold because money is a means to an end, a blessing, a wonderful thing to have. For those of us who think that money isn't important, you just haven't been in a place where you haven't had money. Money is important. And yet, we can get confused about money. We can take that means to a good life and make it our end. When money becomes the end of our existence, it will cause a kind of soul cancer and will eat us away.

So when we ask the question, what do you worship? We mean any kind of intermediary that you tend to treat not as a means anymore, but as an end. It can be anything. It can also be your success or your children. It could be whatever you think is going to put you in touch with the good life. Because the good life is always going to be more than the means we find our way to.

And finally, how do you worship? There's a rabbinic phrase to describe this, it's called *Avodah Zarah*, which means, literally, strange worship. In the passage

***Who do you worship? What do you worship? How do you worship?  
- The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost***

today from Exodus, the minute they begin to worship the golden calf, they suddenly create this little liturgy around it, they create a whole new religion. And this is a kind of way in which we tend to think of religion itself as the end and not the means to God. This is to say that religion itself can devolve into magic when we think it has to be a certain way in order for it to be powerful. If there's any change or any alteration, any experimentation with worship, it will suddenly lose its power.

And that is when religion becomes strange, when it tries to occupy that place for a living God. To be involved in the God of Israel, to be a devotee, and to worship this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to worship this God of Jesus Christ, is to never be confused about the worship we do. It's always a means to an end. It's never a kind of spell we can cast over people.

So these questions are questions you and I have to ask ourselves, who do you worship? Is it a nation? Is it security? Is it peace? Is it the things that you hope for and long for in your lives? What do you worship? Is it money? Is it status? Is it the esteem that people have in you? Is it the way in which you are held in high regard? Is it your friends? Is it their opinion? And how do you worship? How do you work out your life before God on a day to day basis? These are the questions we all have to struggle with now and always as Christians.

And there is one other thing that is meant, I think, in the passage that is part of the Christian tradition that Habertal does not speak of, but which is incredibly powerful for us to keep in mind. And it comes at that moment where Moses, seeing all that has happened to the people of Israel and all the ways that they have experienced and fallen prey to idolatry. Moses stands in the breach, and he intercedes, and he prays, and he asks God to change his mind.

And from the beginning of the Christian faith, we believe that it is Jesus who intercedes before God for us when we fall into idolatry. Jesus has stood in the breach. Jesus has occupied that place. Jesus has paid the price so that we would not have our sin of idolatry overwhelm us. But Jesus has come to restore that image of God so that we can truly be free so that we would have the courage and ability to claim and begin again and find our way back to the living God.

Who do you worship? What do you worship? How do you worship? These are questions we have to struggle with today, and it's because to fall prey to idolatry is something that is just all too human. John Calvin in 1559, the last version of the Christian Institutes, wrote this, he said, "The human heart is an idol making factory. We will just make an idol out of anything. Just give us any kind of sensei thing, anything that you could hold on to with your hands, anything that you really want, any desire, we will make an idol of it," so says Calvin. And Calvin gets

***Who do you worship? What do you worship? How do you worship?  
- The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost***

focused on pleasure, because, well, he was Presbyterian. And there's a great deal of fear about that in that tradition.

But truly all of us can make idols every day. And we do. And one of the things I've noticed about idols is that when you actually make something into an idol, whether it's your academic career or your success, they are not robbed of their power, the extent to which you know that they're not true. The strange thing about idols is that even though we know they're idols, even though we know this is going to cheat me in the end, even though this is going to do me no good, even though I will be taken on a road to ruin if I continue worshiping this idol, we will still go and follow it.

And that is, I think, a lesson to us about idolatry. Idols remain powerful even when we know they're not true. The way, I think, we escape the power of an idol is by admitting our own spiritual poverty and our own spiritual bankruptcy. That moment of surrender is the moment in which we reach out for a living god to intercede on our behalf and to rescue us. And experience has taught me that God will show up and listen.

I want to share with you a poem I wrote in the midst of the pandemic about spiritual bankruptcy. It's on the last page of your bulletins, page 23. And it's called Making Room.

Lord, all I can offer you is my longing and my imperfection.

Some say that it is enough.

If that is the case, except my empty heart,

I have been waiting for you to fill it so long that I forget to pray.

Look upon my longing as my prayer

So that my prayer is unceasing.

Come visit the empty rooms I have left for you

Just as you made them to be.

That admission of spiritual poverty, that admission of spiritual bankruptcy, is the key, I believe, to toppling idols. Because then God can act in a powerful way. I suspect this might be true for you because it is true for me.

Today we are faced with a choice and that choice is made stark because of the world that we're living in today. It's whether or not we are going to make room for God or not in our lives. And we have chosen, because I believe God is leading us, we have chosen to make room for God by forming a church and supporting this church and giving to this church. And you've often heard that the practice of pledging is a spiritual practice. And you've probably thought like I have thought for years, that this is a little bit like receiving good advice about

***Who do you worship? What do you worship? How do you worship?  
- The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost***

dieting. Horrible, right? Someone just says to you it's about a calorie deficit. I feel so shamed when people say calorie deficit to me.

Pledging is not about going on a spiritual diet. Pledging is about declaring spiritual poverty and giving of yourself a new kind of offering to God of your time, of your talent, and your treasure, with the hope that God, the living God, will be active again. That is the spiritual practice of pledging. And we do it here in this community, because this is our way of opting in and acknowledging our shared propensity to be idol makers, and also our shared hope and belief that God will continue to act and lift us up again.

May that be so in this time. May we be the church God has called us to be with all that God has called us to be. And may we find our way to that Savior who stands in the breach for us so that we may know God and see God and live.

Amen.