

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

September 23, 2012

Ezekiel 14:1-8; Psalm 135:15-18; I John 5:19-22

Not In Human Image

(Second in series, The Ten Commandments: More Than They Seem)

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. –Exodus 20:4,5–

*Those who make them
And all who trust them
Shall become like them. Psalm 135:18*

Isn't that something? *Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them.* I confess that I was not impressed with this verse until doing the research for this sermon. Perhaps I read it previously, maybe long ago in another version, but it never stood out in my mind. The Old King James renders it beautifully but unremarkably.

They that make them are like unto them: so is everyone that trusteth in them.

That doesn't quite have the bite of the modern English. And here's the other point. The middle of Psalm 135 is about idols and idolatry. Who thinks about idols and idolatry any more? Do modern people even know what the terms mean? If ten people were asked today what idolatry means I wonder how many would get the right answer? Hmmn...Let's see—idolatry...is that when you're unfaithful to your spouse?

So on first thought the second commandment may seem somewhat irrelevant now. I would wager that not many sermons were preached about it from Christian pulpits so far this year. But, still, you know, it *is* one of the Ten. As a matter of fact it is the second one. That puts it near the top. So it does not seem to be a divine afterthought or something superfluous. It is the second in sequence of the most basic set of laws God ever gave, laws so important that God did not leave it up to Moses to deliver them like all the other laws God handed down. Rather God spoke the Ten Commandments to the people God's self. Some people today may not know what idolatry is, but almost everyone might be able to explain in general what the Ten Commandments are? I have always considered the Ten Commandments to be timeless. Maybe most of us have. But then how do we understand this second one?

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I am a jealous God,..(Exodus 20:4,5a)

It is the second commandment. It is near the top. We probably should not ignore it. And if the Psalmist is on to something, the stated consequence of breaking the second Commandment is ominous.

*Those who make them
And all who trust them
Shall become like them.*

Who makes idols now and who worships them? What is the significance of the second commandment for people today?

Perhaps the best way to understand the meaning of an idol might be to define it as something which is given ultimate value but is created by human beings. Now if we think about that for a moment we might see that such has been a human tendency from the beginning and has not stopped yet. It may not be that models of physical things on, above, or underneath the earth are often made and then worshipped today, but perhaps that was never really the gist of the problem. Personally, I just find it hard to believe that people in general of any generation, even ancient people, could ever really think that some statue or carving or molded representation of something could have power, that it was not as it seemed to be, a dead stone or metal bust, but was instead alive and acting in the world somehow. Did people in general, even long ago, really believe such things? It did seem in fact to be the case for some people if we trust the Biblical record, but I just can't believe it true for the general population. I think the more common problem may have been then, as well as now, a more subtle one than that. The making of an idol at any time might involve the same psychological mechanism; the capacity of human beings to project something of themselves into something else, even into an inanimate object.

Some time ago a film was produced called "Castaway" starring Tom Hanks as a smart modern businessman marooned on an island by himself due to his being the lone survivor of a plane crash in the ocean. It was not long after Hanks got to the island that detritus from the plane began to wash up on shore, one object of which was a soccer ball. Soon Hanks was talking to the soccer ball which he named appropriately, Wilson, for that was the insignia printed on the ball. Wilson, of course, was an imaginary person created by Tom Hanks. Tom was lonely. He needed someone to talk to. Was he insane? Probably not, at least that is not the implication of the film. Hanks projected life into the soccer ball and gave to the ball human characteristics as he experienced them. All the attributes of Wilson would certainly have been creations of Tom's. What else could they have been?

It may be that the problem with idols was never only the folly of actually worshipping a dumb stone as if it were alive but also the fallacy of worshipping a projection of ourselves. The great error of idolatry was not only thinking that something

made by human hands had divine life, but also attributing to it human characteristics, including human weaknesses, vanities, and selfishness. In short, to worship an idol was to worship a false idea of God, indeed to create God in the human image instead of the other way around. There is a humorous little adage I was told some time ago. Perhaps you have heard it too. It runs in some fashion like this: God created human beings in the divine image, and then human beings returned the favor.

Perhaps among the more common idols of today are those which in some form represent human intelligence. An idol now could even be an idea itself, such as the scientific method or a political persuasion. In Dostoevsky's great novel, The Possessed, Russian communists of the late nineteenth century believed that the communist idea was more important than anything else. No matter how much suffering its victory required, no matter how many innocent people needed to die in order for Communism to live, no matter how many other values needed to be compromised, no matter what price was required, the establishment of Communism was worth it. Dostoevsky's understanding of the matter seems to be that to the nineteenth century Russian communist nothing was more important than communism. The Communist idea was God for them, and Communism would become an idol that tormented much of the world throughout the Twentieth Century. Without the softening influence of other moral and spiritual values, Russian Communism and its followers were ruthless and heartless. *Those who make them, and all who trust them, shall become like them.*

I think that for some, science and technology can be idols today. For some people, science is not just a marvelous tool for discovering truth about the physical world but the only way of knowing any truth at all. For some, what is not the province of science could not possibly be real. Would not the making of science into an exclusionary way of discerning truth be to make it an idol? If what science can discover is the only truth there is, then there can be no spiritual reality. If a person has only a scientific understanding of reality is he or she in danger of missing a whole other dimension of life including beauty and awe and even hope and love? *Those who make them, and all who trust them, will become like them.*

And do we look at money as an idol which buys the things that we make. If radical scientism is right, and the only reality is material, then the means of acquiring the material things we need or want is the ultimate value; money the ultimate power and our best security. And like other idols, money has an image stamped upon it but it has no feelings. *Those who make them, and all who trust them, will become like them.*

The second Commandment brokers no compromise. There is nothing else like God. We are made in the image of God but God is infinitely more than we are in every way. To in any manner make God into our image, instead of the other way around, is absurd. And if the gods we make are projections of ourselves, then not only will we become like them, we already are like them. And would I not be anxious indeed if God is anything like me?

