

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost • October 12, 2014

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Luke 4:5-8

“All This I Will Give You: The Temptation of Idolatry”

My family used to have an evacuation plan for how we'd get out of our house if we ever had a fire. When my brother and I were little, we knew that we were supposed to get out of the house if the fire alarm went off, always checking the knob on a closed door to see if it was hot to the touch. If we were up on the second floor and fire blocked the staircase, we were supposed to head to our parent's bedroom where they had an emergency roll-ladder stored away in their closet. I, for one, would have thought it'd be cooler to have one of those giant, inflatable airbag down on the ground, so we could have jumped out the window like a stuntman. My parents apparently didn't share my enthusiasm. Your family might have spent time putting together your own plan, especially if you had young children around. It's a good idea to be prepared. It's nice to have a sense of security in knowing what you could do in case disaster struck. Our family plan, including the emergency exit ladder, was a kind of safety net for us.

Flash forward to the present day. I still don't have a giant airbag as a safety net. (If you do, let me know.) I've got something else. Maybe you do, too. It's called “money.”

You might look at the money in your bank accounts or investments as your safety net. In case of emergency, you've got something out there to break your fall. You might be saving up for or already living on money that you set aside for your retirement. That's all part of sound financial management. But to what extent do you trust money to take care of your need when the heat is on? Every year or so, a news story pops up about some group – most often an atheist organization – which is lobbying to have the phrase “IN GOD WE TRUST” removed from U.S. currency. Consider for a moment the American consumer culture of which you and I are a part. If we're going to be honest, those groups have a point in looking to change the wording on our currency. But they've got it backwards. Instead of taking words away, they should merely look to **add** one word to accurately reflect our American mindset: “IN *THIS* GOD WE TRUST.”

So what makes a god? In one sense, a god is that which you love, trust, and fear above all things. Under that definition, humanity has more gods than we could hope to count. What do you trust above all else? Is it money, or the things which you can see that give you hope? What do you love above all else? What do you fear and worship, giving over your time and energy at its altar?

What would happen if that all fell away? God has given you many good gifts, gifts to celebrate and enjoy: your family, your work, your hobbies, your health. Losing any of these hurts. Would your world completely fall apart if your spouse or your children died? If you lost your job and became unemployed? If you were diagnosed with a chronic or even terminal condition? The simple truth of the matter is that if you've elevated anything other than God to such an ultimately high and lofty position in your life, you've made it an idol.

Idolatry is evil, for it turns everything around from how it should be. Instead of worshiping God, the giver of all good gifts, idolatry is worshiping the gift itself as a god. Idolatry takes people who are designed to enjoy freedom in God's love and makes them slaves: slaves to money, slaves to food, slaves to popularity, slaves to sexual desire. Here's the thing, though: people – including you and me – don't generally look to pursue the evil of idolatry. Seeing one of God's good gifts and pursuing it, we can fail to see the temptation that the devil puts before us, the temptation to give ourselves over to it and worship it. When we fall to the temptation of idolatry, we forget that the one true God is really the owner and giver of the gift.

When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness that second time (as recorded in Luke 4), he did the same thing that he does to you and me: he lied, twisting the truth in an attempt to get Jesus to stumble in the mission for which the Son of God came to earth. Satan asserts that he can give the authority and glory of the kingdoms of the earth to whomever he pleases. But while he might be able to tempt people into following his path away from God, God is still the ultimate owner and giver of creation and all the authority therein. Adam and Eve fell for the devil's lie back in Eden. They knew the glory of walking with God and had authority over all creation as its divinely-appointed caretakers, but they traded that all away for the poor substitute of setting their own will above God's, losing the good which they'd been given.

This second temptation reveals Satan's twisted understanding of worship, one which lies at the root of the temptation of idolatry. He says, “Worship me, and then I will give,” making worship and service a

prerequisite of enjoying his favor. That's the exact opposite of God's position: the Father graciously gives you all things first, and then worship comes in response.

Jesus saw through Satan's lie. When he responded to the devil by quoting Deuteronomy 6, Jesus calls out the question at the heart of the temptation to idolatry: Who do you worship and serve? Worship and service go together. You'll serve that which you worship, devoting what you have and even your very self to that end. Jesus knows that you can't serve two masters. It's an either/or situation. And Jesus would only serve God, his Father and our Father, acknowledging him alone as the One who is worthy of our worship and service.

Jesus was obedient, following the will of God the Father. He recognized that his calling was not to gain earthly authority and glory. While Satan said, "All this I will give you...", Jesus was really the one with authority. Christ set his glory aside in becoming incarnate, but he exercised divine authority in his teaching and miracles throughout the ministry that would follow his temptation by the devil. When the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the inhabited world in an instant of time, Jesus knew that his mission was to save all those people. He set aside the glory that was his since before the beginning of time and came to take care of the problem of sin and death that entered the world through Adam and Eve's disobedience. He showed true fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Jesus worshiped and served his Father, obeying the First Commandment instead of setting himself first, even giving himself up to death.

Consider today where you've been tempted to look to what you can see for your hope. What do you trust above all else? Where are you looking for hope? In Psalm 23, the psalmist points to the ultimate source of hope. God alone is the shepherd who will lead you to the waters of stillness even when the rest of the world is falling apart.

We are called to dependence on the Father, not money or anything else that we might see. As we heard in Isaiah 25, God would set out a bountiful feast for His people, providing everything that is needed for this life and life into the age to come. And as in that Last Day, God's people can depend in His grace for salvation, just as Jesus did in his response to the temptation to idolatry. With God as our hope, we can do what is right before God and man while maintaining a posture of dependence on God.

So how might we avoid falling into the temptation of idolatry and maintaining that posture of dependence on God while going about life in today's world? Listen to Jesus' word: worship God and serve him only. Don't look to possess the people or the world around you, but to love them. We do that both as a congregation of Christians in this time and place and as individuals. It's not "my church" or "my mission," or even "our church" or "our mission," rather, we recognize that it's all God's. Imagine how your choices might look different if everything around you had a label on it that read "God's." It's God's checking account, God's refrigerator, God's child, God's office. And it's not that He needs them – He gives all these into your care for use in His mission to give restored life to the world.

God is greater than the things that we can see. When the heat is on, it is far better for you and me to put our trust in Him, even more so that some safety net or giant, inflatable cushion that we would set up to catch us when we fall. Look to Jesus, who beat the devil. Look to the cross, and know that because of Jesus you can confidently say, "In God I trust."

Amen.