

"IDOL RELIGION"
1 Corinthians 10:1-14
March 24, 2019 Third Sunday in Lent
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Imagine if the Apostle Paul communicated with his churches by texting. His communication with the Corinthians might sound like this:

Paul: Hello Corinth. Love and greetings to all. Praying hands emoji.

Corinth: Hey Paul! Long time no see! Smiley face emoji.

Paul: How R things going in the church?

Corinth: We're good. How R you?

Paul: Really? You R good? Quizzical face emoji

Corinth: Yep! Thumbs up emoji

Paul: That's not what I've been hearing. Sad face emoji

Corinth: Umm... Who have you been talking to?

Paul: What's going on?

Corinth: Well... some disagreements.

Paul: About????

Corinth: Actually... just about everything. Devil emoji

Paul: ??????

Corinth: Leadership, worship, money, sex, what we eat and where, the menu at potlucks, and... even you. Embarrassed emoji face

Paul: Sad emoji face-- Sad emoji face-- Sad emoji face -

Corinth: We really messed up. I'm sorry, Paul.

Paul: We have a lot to talk about—too much for a text. I'll

send an email. Make sure you print it out and read it in worship on Sunday.

Corinth: OK thumbs up emoji

Paul: I. MEAN. IT. This is important. It is life and death.

Promise! Serious face emoji

Corinth: Promise! Thumbs up emoji

Paul: God loves you. I love you. Christ will never give up on you. I won't either. Heart emoji Heart emoji Praying hands emoji

Corinth: heart emoji

Corinth was a major commercial center in Greece. The people of Corinth had a reputation in the ancient world as being hard-drinking, sexually promiscuous, and unruly. When Paul arrived and began building a community of believers, those new Christians brought their old reputations right into the church with them. Paul spent a year and a half there teaching them about the gospel of Jesus Christ. He taught them how to live as followers of Jesus. He taught them what it meant to be a family of faith, a community of believers. He challenged them to turn away from their old lives and embrace the new life with God.

After Paul established the church and trained new leaders he went off to build churches in other cities. Things went well for a while in Corinth but then people started to revert to their old behavior. They began to disagree and insist on their own way. They began to divide into factions- fighting with one another for power and prestige in the church. They started doing some of the things Paul had told them to stop doing.

Good news travels fast but bad news travels faster and before too long Paul began hearing about the problems at the Corinthian church. He sends them a

pastoral letter- firm, affectionate, clear, and unapologetic about the importance of God's presence in their lives. He doesn't disown them and he doesn't shame them. He reminds them **who** they

are and **whose** they are. He reminds them that they are forgiven BUT they have to stop all their sinful behavior.

Two things to remember about Paul's letters: He believes that Christ will return in his lifetime and that the world as he knows it will end. He also calls the church to be an "alternative society." He calls them to be "*a very self-conscious minority group living by distinctive standards, yet not turning its back on the outside world.*" (David Hay)

Paul has been around long enough to know the church is not, and cannot be, perfect- because human beings are involved. He believes that the church is "*A community of fallible persons called to model both freedom and holiness, both humility and confidence, both tolerance of differences and such a unified articulation of truth that others will look at them and say, 'God is really among you.'*" (David Hay) That is still a good description of who we are called to be today.

We find the main focus of this text in verse 14, "*Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.*" (NRSV)

"So, my very dear friends, when you see people reducing God to something they can use or control, get out of their company as fast as you can." (THE MESSAGE)

If we think we can't relate to the idea of worshiping idols- hear this again, "*people reducing God to something they can use or control.*"

Many of the new Christians in the Corinthian church had been pagans so worshiping idols was just a part of their lives. After their conversion, many continued to accept invitations to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols or to eat in the pagan temples. It was part of their social lives. It was accepted and expected

activity in Corinth. If they refused such invitations they could lose friends or even business opportunities. When they were challenged about this practice by their Christian leaders (and Paul) they said, *"Oh, don't worry. I am so strong in my faith as a Christian that I cannot be tempted to fall back into my pagan ways."*

Paul argues that they should not only be concerned about their own faith, their own relationship with Christ, but they should also be concerned about fellow Christians who may not be as mature in their faith. He says that their acceptance of having dinner at the "All You Can Eat Idol Worship Buffet" could cause others to turn away from Christ and turn toward the idols. He tells them that they are responsible for the faith of their sisters and brothers in the church.

They think it is harmless behavior and Paul knows that it is not. Idol worship is when we give our love and devotion to anything that isn't God. Paul knew that when human beings turn their hearts toward things they themselves have created, instead of toward the God who gave us life, our spirits are malnourished, our egos are inflated, we turn our backs on one another, and we forget the purpose of life.

Another thing Paul does in this letter is to remind the Christians in Corinth of their spiritual ancestry. Although they were not Jews- he recites the history of the Israelites as their history too. He writes, "Remember **our** history and be warned." He reminds them of the Exodus- when the Hebrew people were freed from slavery in Egypt. He reminds them of the miracles of crossing the Red Sea, following God in a pillar of cloud, the daily meal of manna, and the sustenance of water gushing from a rock. He reminds the Corinthians that the newly freed people lived every day within the power and presence of God. But even that was not enough to keep them faithful.

When he writes, "First the people partied, then they threw a dance," he is referring to one of the most egregious sins they committed. When Moses went up the mountain to talk to God and receive the Ten Commandments, the people were left under the leadership of his brother, Aaron. In the absence of Moses the people did what they often did- they began to grumble and complain that he was

taking too long. With Aaron's agreement, they melted down their gold and created a golden calf. And then they worshiped it.

This is how the NRSV describes the scene. *"Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.*

He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it." (Exodus 32:15-16, 19-20).

Paul warns the Corinthians that the same thing could happen to them. And they said, *"Oh no. We would never do that. Our faith is too strong. We are spiritually superior. We know the difference between the idols and God, so it's ok."* But Paul knew better. He knew how easy it was for a small temptation to turn into a golden calf. For the benefit of his friends in Corinth, Paul lifts up the ugliest of the family secrets and implores them not to allow history to repeat itself.

Idolatry seems to be an addiction for us human beings. Even though we know that are cradled in the love and presence of the Almighty God who created the heavens and the earth- we so easily abandon our faithful God for that which is newer and shinier. *"We know who the real God is so it's not a big deal if we relieve some stress and dance around this golden calf. We're just having fun. It doesn't mean anything."* But it is a big deal. And it does mean something.

Doesn't it seem as though whole industries are committed to the making and marketing of idols? Temptations to worship idols are as pervasive and prevalent today as they were in the wilderness with the Israelites and in Corinth with the new Christians- and they can be just as deadly. We tread on dangerous ground when we think that there is really no danger of worshiping an idol, a false god. We tell ourselves that we can participate casually in whatever our culture considers

"normal." But Paul reminds us to scrutinize our small compromises with the cultural systems around us. For those called to be shaped by Christ, we often find that we resemble our American culture more than we do the Prince of Peace.

I am not worried that one of these days some of us may melt our gold and dance around a calf. I am more concerned that we may fall into the myth that acquiring wealth and material possessions is the most important thing we can do.

I worry more about the idols of status, power, individualism, patriarchy, and white privilege.

I worry about Christians falling into the trap of worshiping political leaders and celebrities, athletes and musicians, and even Christian leaders.

Authentic worship brings us together at the table of Jesus Christ where there is a place for everyone and everyone has enough to eat and drink. Authentic worship calls us to share our lives with one another, to lift each other up, and to seek unity even in our differences.

On our journey of faith I think one of the biggest mistakes we make is when we start thinking about only what we want and need rather than asking where God is leading us and how we might follow.

- When we in the church close the circle and refuse to allow others into the family we are worshiping the wrong god.
- When we deem ourselves superior to people of other faiths and happily announce that they are not God's people we are worshiping a false god.
- When we, as a congregation, lament over who we **aren't** and what we **don't** have instead of celebrating the blessings God has showered upon us then we are praising idols.
- When we forget that life with Christ is supposed to change us and we prefer to look and act like everyone else then we can be sure we are kneeling before the wrong god.

- When, in our arrogance, we proclaim that only we have the Spiritual Truth then you can be sure that our god is made of gold and moos like a calf.

During this season of Lent, as we prepare to walk to the cross with Jesus and to proclaim new life on Easter Sunday- we are called to a time of self-examination and renewal, as individuals and as a congregation. We are called to think about our journey of faith, to be honest about the mistakes of the past that we are re-living, and to seek God's guidance and forgiveness as we move forward. The life of faith is a communal journey- one that we share with each other. As the gathered community, we journey together through the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows, the unity and conflict.

One of our greatest blessings is that we walk together, as fallible human beings, knowing that God leads us, Christ walks with us, and the Holy Spirit strengthens us. We must be honest enough to admit that we will mess up from time to time. We must be honest enough to admit that the life of faith isn't always easy. But doing it together—that is what makes it holy.

Smiling face emoji Thumbs up emoji Praying hand emoji Heart emoji

Amen.