

**26<sup>th</sup> Week after Pentecost – Year A – Proper 27 - November 12, 2008 - Homily**  
**Joshua 24:103a, 14-25, Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13**  
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One of the most curious things about twenty-first century living is that unerring yet subconscious belief that all the talk of idolatry in the Hebrew Scriptures – you know the **Old** Testament -- no longer applies to you and me. Perhaps we like to think that we have evolved beyond such temptations, especially when idols are described for us as they are in the Book of Joshua as the “gods of your ancestors”, “the gods of the Amorites”, or “foreign gods”. In other books of Scripture, idols are described as being made of “wood and stone, of silver and gold.” Interestingly, the word on idols and idolatry does not end in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is a frequent topic of condemnation throughout the New Testament as well. The frequency with which idolatry is discussed in less than glowing terms in the Word of God should give us pause for thought. Are you and I, in the comfort of our modernity, really removed and purged of this great offence against God?

If you visit any Christian gift shop or bookstore you are likely to see a popular plaque that reads, “Choose this day whom you will serve, ... as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” It is taken directly from the Book of Joshua, and our specific reading for this evening. It decorates many a home with a bold statement of faith and service. In the reading from Joshua, he retells the story of God’s providential care and love for the Israelites as a background for the people’s understanding of why they would want to love this God above all others. Joshua then asks the people to choose whom they will serve. The overwhelming response is that they will also serve the Lord, the God of their ancestors who brought them up out of the land of Egypt. Joshua then provides a warning about what it means to serve God above all. And the people once again affirm that they will love and serve the Lord. Finally, Joshua tells the people what they have chosen again and that they are witnesses against themselves and must put away their foreign gods. For the third time, the people proclaim their promise to love, serve and obey only God. It was a covenant they would be destined to break repeatedly, but one to which they are also destined to return repeatedly.

This three-fold affirmation is also found on the lips of Peter, in the Gospel of John when Jesus makes a post-resurrection visit to the disciples, cooking breakfast for them and then taking Peter aside saying, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17).

The link is important here for at least two reasons. The first is that Joshua was preparing the Israelites for the difficult task of being Light bearers to all the nations of the world. That is, in keeping to the commandment to love God with all their hearts, souls, and might, these chosen children of God would not be distracted from their mission. They would not fall prey to worship of self, the false worship of creation rather than the creator, or the worship of anything they could make for themselves. As the story unfolds, we discover that the leaders of the Israelites become more and more self-focused on the ‘how to’ and ‘who best’ keeps to the rules. They become more insular, rigid, and despising of others, rather than teachers of God’s way, and a people through whom God’s love is so evident that others are also drawn to worship of the one true God. They worship God, but their worship itself becomes a form of idolatry because the leaders of God’s people teach a type of piety and religiosity that is self-righteousness in God’s eyes. What this form of idolatry blocks the Israelites from doing is what we learn from the related passage in the Gospel of John.

In John’s Gospel Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” It is a specific type of love, the

unconditional or agape love that is asked of Peter. Peter responds three times that he does love Jesus. Three times Peter expresses that love as brotherly or filial love. Jesus does not lose patience with Peter, and the lesson is not lost to us for all Peter's impatient responses. What Joshua is also preparing the Israelites for is lives that demonstrate and share God's love and grace to the whole world. What Jesus is preparing Peter, you and me to be, is the same -- covenantal lovers of God. A threefold commitment that binds us in covenant, where we lose ourselves for Christ's sake so that God can prepare our hearts, souls and minds to feed God's lambs, tend His sheep, and feed His sheep. In other words, what Joshua is preparing the Israelites for, and what Jesus came to teach us about the Law and commandments of God is summed up in the Great Commandment: first love God, and then love our neighbors as ourselves.

And so our challenge today is to consider how our own forms of idolatry have become a barrier to fulfilling God's great commandment. It may not be statues of foreign gods that we have made for ourselves or bought that draw us away from loving and worshipping God today. However, it may be a prideful heart in what we think we have achieved by our own efforts in this life. Our idolatry may also be an emotional trap, perhaps resisting God's call on our lives to give of ourselves to those we are afraid of, like the homeless, or mentally ill, or those who look or speak differently from us. Failing to risk being bearers of God's love, keeping ourselves emotionally or physically encapsulated, is like putting the Light of God into a sealed container. Eventually, the light will burn out, and all the life-giving oxygen will be used up. Jesus did not live a safe life. Jesus ministered above all to the outcasts and marginalized in society, those who were shunned, or labeled as sinners. He touched lepers and healed God's children on the Sabbath invoking the ire of the religious leaders. His love of God was so broad that He drew crowds of people to hear the Good News, and fed them all in body, mind and spirit. Jesus' love of God and neighbor was so deep that He gave His life for the sake of the whole world.

Idolatry comes in many forms. It can be as rigid as the plaque on our wall, and just as lifeless. Idolatry is a resistance to God's love and a resistance to loving God wholly, and in a way of life that is becoming more Christ-like and therefore holy. Joshua invites you and me, God invites us all, to reflect on our own covenant in relationship. Our relationships with God, with one another, and with all the things that potentially or actually, keep us from sharing God's extravagant love and grace with a whole world of fearful neighbors.

Amen.