



**A Sermon from Rev. Jeff Hassel, Senior Associate Pastor
Davidson United Methodist Church
January 29, 2012**

The Sermon Text: I Corinthians 8:1-13

American Idols

CENTERING

What song have Bo Diddley, The Doors, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, The Rolling Stones, Santana, Bob Seger, The Yardbirds and my personal favorite, George Thorogood and the Destroyers all recorded?

The answer? “Who do you love.”

I bring that up because when we take all the talk and teaching about idols and boil it down to its base ingredient, the question “Who Do You Love” is the one that remains. *An idol is created when someone or something that occupies the place of God in our life.”[It] gives us identity, meaning, value, purpose, love, significance, security...or it SEEMS to.* And we create idols ...individually and collectively...without an awareness of what has happened – until the idol fails, as they all do. This morning I invite you on a journey that begins in ancient Corinth, a city in Greece where we encounter *modern* idols.

Let us worship.


SETTING THE STAGE

I remember going to an organ recital at Duke Chapel when I was in seminary. As we entered that beautiful space the ushers were offering program notes so we could better understand that the music told the composer’s story of wrestling with God after his sister died of a horrible sickness. Because I knew the story behind the music the concert was powerful for me.

I read through today’s epistle several times and each time came away with the question, *WHAT on earth is going on here?* So I thought it would be a good idea to set the stage.

My junior year in college I took a tour of Europe. 7 countries and 11 cities in 3 months. One of the places we visited were the ruins of ancient Corinth.

It was a wealthy city built on a four mile wide stretch of land with the Aegean Sea on the East and the Adriatic Sea on the West. Rather than navigate the 420 miles around the Peloponnese peninsula, ship owners could unload the cargo in one port and have it hauled across that narrow strip of land to a ship on the other, or they could pay to have their entire



ship hauled out of the water and be *rolled across* to the other sea. *It was the original Panama Canal* and Corinth made good money in the cargo business and a fortune off of the sailors and merchants that traveled through.

The virtual Tour:

Our hoard of college students came in from the north, the direction of Athens...entering the ancient city on the Laecheum Road. Our professors spun the story of what the ruins that surrounded us looked like back in A.D. 50, when the Apostle Paul and an estimated 200-500,000 others lived there. Over on the right as we entered the city was the temple of Apollo, and to the right of that, a temple dedicated to the god of healing, Asclepius, and then a statue of Athena, the fountain of Poseidon, the Pantheon (which is the temple to all the gods), and temple of the Imperial Cult. Up on the mountain that serves as the backdrop to the city are the ruins of the infamous Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, that used to have a thousand temple prostitutes attending to “the faithful.”

There were no Harris-Teeters or Food Lions in Corinth, so they bought their food in an open market. Most of the meat sold at the market was left over from the sacrificial rituals performed in the temples. So the question became, is it dangerous to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols?

A dietician was once addressing a large audience in Chicago. "The material we put into our stomachs is enough to have killed most of us sitting here, years ago," she said. "Red meat is awful. Soft drinks erode your stomach lining. Everything today has High Fructose Corn Syrup, which is hard for our livers to digest. The pesticides on vegetables can be disastrous."

"But there is one thing that is the most dangerous of all and many of us have, or will, eat it. Can anyone here tell me what food it is that causes the most grief and suffering for years after eating it?"

A 75-year-old man in the front row stood up and said, "Wedding cake!"

The issue wasn't whether the food was dangerous to one's physical health – but whether it was dangerous to one's spiritual health if it had been sacrificed to a pagan god. Paul was clear: The God we know is the creator of all there is, so it is not possible that these other gods really exist, and if they don't exist, the meat offered to them cannot be tainted. What Paul also does is expand the conversation from idol meat to a more important question for those living in that city of so many gods, temples and distractions:

“To whom do we belong? God? Or is there something or someone else that we live for?”



THE SERMON

Back in 2009, Terry Moran of ABC News NIGHTLINE did a story on Celebrity Culture and Worshipping False Idols

He said, “In America these days, idols are everywhere. Music idols like Britney and Madonna. Sports idols like Jeter or Manning (*remember now, this is a whole three years ago – see how fast idols change?*). Fashion idols like Gucci, Armani or Prada. We even have television shows to make our own "American Idol."

It's as if there is a need, a hunger in America to idolize.

But wait a minute. Isn't that just pop culture? Modern life?

Just what is an idol?

They then segue to an interview with a pastor of a huge Christian church in Seattle who is well known for his sermons on modern idols, and he says:

"An idol is someone or something that occupies the place of God in our life; it gives us identity, meaning, value, purpose, love, significance, security. When the Bible uses the word 'idol', that's what it's getting at." ⁱⁱ

SEE THIS VIDEO LINK!!

<http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video?id=8759993><http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video?id=8759993>

In the United States, when someone thinks of idols, they may think only of statues that people worship in certain parts of the world. We may not consider that a television can be an idol. We may not consider that a vehicle, a house, certain possessions, a hobby, a person, a political party, a cause, a job, a sport, an addiction, lusts, pleasures, or some other thing, can become an idol.ⁱⁱⁱ

An idol has such a controlling position in our heart that we can spend most of our passion and energy, our emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. *An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant or secure."*

There are many ways to describe the kind of relationship we have with our idols, but perhaps the best one is worship. The old pagans were not fanciful when they depicted virtually everything as a god. They had sex gods, work gods, war gods, money gods, and nation gods - *for the simple fact that anything can be a god that rules and serves as a deity in the heart of a person or in the life of a people.*^{iv}



In preparation for this sermon, I came across a book called *Counterfeit Gods*, written by Timothy Keller. He teaches what happens when we take things that are in and of themselves good and turn them into what he calls “ultimate things” – idols. He lists a series of questions that help identify the idols in our lives and the one that hit me right between the eyes was, **“What, if we lost it all, would make life not worth living?”**^v For me, THAT question is a sharp blade through my defenses. Our answer, if not God, is our idol. I like the book, and have ordered it for our library.

To help us wrap our heads around the topic and open our hearts to what may be going on in us without our knowing - because idols are slippery like - that let me offer the stories of three well-known people and their idols.

Andrew Carnegie became one of the wealthiest men in the world when his steel company became the most profitable business enterprise in the world. Early on in his success, at age thirty-three, Carnegie took a ruthless evaluation of his own heart and produced a “note to self” memo. This is what he said:

Man must have an idol—The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry. No idol more debasing than the worship of money. Whatever I engage in I must push inordinately therefore should I be careful to choose the life which will be the most elevating in character. To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery. I will resign business at Thirty five, but during the ensuing two years, I wish to spend the afternoons in securing instruction, and in reading systematically.^{vi}

Despite his insight into his own heart, Carnegie obviously did not “resign business” two years later, and many of the character-degrading effects he feared worked themselves out in his life. Andrew Carnegie knew that money was an idol in his heart, but he didn’t know how to root it out. It can’t be removed, only replaced by a relationship with God.^{vii}

Pop legend Madonna describes the seduction of success in her own words:

I have an iron will, and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy. . . . I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and think I’m mediocre and uninteresting. . . . Again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that’s always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I’ve become Somebody, I still have to prove that I’m Somebody . My struggle has never ended and it probably never will.^{viii}



For Madonna, success is like a drug that gives her a sense of consequence and worth, but the 'high' wears off and she must prove herself again and again. The driving force behind her is not joy but fear, and she doesn't know the One who can offer her what she needs.^{ix}

In honor of last week's sermon let's look at Jonah. So why did he run away from God and away from Nineveh? I think he was tripped-up by his idols.

A personal idol: He wanted ministry success more than he wanted to obey God.

A cultural idol: He put the national interests of Israel over obedience to God and the spiritual good of the Ninevites. And a religious idol: He was incredibly self-righteousness religious man. He felt superior to the wicked, pagan Ninevites and didn't want to see them saved. *Remember that from Jody's sermon?* These idols – that Jonah didn't even know he had - led him to rebel against the very God he was so proud of serving.^x

At the end of the book, God asks Jonah: "Shouldn't your love be like mine? Will you come out of your self-absorption and idolatry and begin to live for me and for others?" We wait for an answer... and it never comes...because the book ends!

The ending is at the same time, satisfying and brilliant. It's satisfying because we don't need to wonder whether Jonah repented and saw the light. He must have. How do we know? Well, how else would we know this story, unless Jonah told it to someone? *And who would ever tell a story in which he is seen as an evil fool on every page, except a man in whom God's grace had reached the center of his heart?*^{xi} It's like one of those movies where you don't see the ending but you know what happened!

The brilliant part is that we are brought into the story! It is as if God –with that question - aimed an arrow of loving rebuke at Jonah's heart, pulled back on the bow, set it flying, and suddenly Jonah vanishes, *leaving us in its path?*^{xii} The question is coming right at us, because you are Jonah and I am Jonah. We are unknowingly caught-up in the worship of our idols and because of that, we cannot be the faithful and loving people that God created us to be! "Shouldn't your love be like mine?" God asked. "Will you come out of your self-absorption and idolatry and begin to live for me and for others?" Are we, like Jonah, willing to change? The story of our lives has not yet been written...how will the movie end?

Think of the disappointments and troubles that come our way. It seems to me that the most painful times in our lives are times in which our idols are being threatened or removed. When that happens we can respond in two ways. We can feel entitled to wallow in bitterness and despair, saying, "I've worked all my life to get to this place in my career, and now it's all gone!" or "I've slaved my whole life for my family, given them a good life, and this is how they repay me!?" In order to get some relief from the pain of a failing idol, we may feel at liberty to lie, cheat, take revenge, or throw away our principles.

Or we could say, "Oh, God. You may be calling me to live my life without something I never thought I could live without. But if I have you, I have the only *identity, meaning, value, purpose, love, significance, security* I really need *and cannot lose.*" As some of us gathered here in this



sanctuary have learned through bumps in the road of life... we don't realize Jesus is all we need until Jesus is all we have.^{xiii}

The first step in defeating our idols is recognizing what they are. This week, notice where you spend your time and money and what dominates your thoughts...and ask yourself that question: "What, if I lost it all, would make life not worth living?" What results, could be "idol territory."

The good news is that we are not lost to our idols. We belong to a God of second chances – just ask Jonah about that! As we close I wish to fill this sanctuary and fill our hearts with the promise and hope of Psalm 16:

Psalm 16

1 Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge.**2** I said to the LORD, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing."**3** As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.**4** The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods... I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.
8 I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.**9** Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure,**10** because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.**11** You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/idolatry-dancing-with-myself-peter-loughman-sermon-on-paranormal-97076.asp?page=2>

ⁱⁱ <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video?id=8759993>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.amazingbible.org/Documents/Bible_Studies/Idols.htm

^{iv} Keller, Timothy (2011-10-04). Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters (pp. 68-70). Penguin Group. Kindle Edition

^v http://www.amazon.com/Counterfeit-Gods-Empty-Promises-Matters/product-reviews/1594485496/ref=cm_cr_dp_all_helpful?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending

^{vi} Keller, Timothy (2011-10-04). Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters (p. 69). Penguin Group. Kindle Edition.



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- ^{vii} Keller, Timothy (2011-10-04). *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (pp. 68-70). Penguin Group. Kindle Edition.
- ^{viii} Keller, Timothy (2011-10-04). *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (p. 72). Penguin Group. Kindle Edition.
- ^{ix} Keller, Timothy (2011-10-04). *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (pp. 72-73). Penguin Group. Kindle Edition.
- ^x Keller, Timothy (2011-10-04). *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (p. 136). Penguin Group. Kindle Edition.
- ^{xi} Keller, Timothy (2011-10-04). *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (pp. 152-153). Penguin Group. Kindle Edition.
- ^{xii} Keller, Timothy (2011-10-04). *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (pp. 152-153). Penguin Group. Kindle Edition.
- ^{xiii} Keller, Timothy (2011-10-04). *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (pp. 18-19). Penguin Group. Kindle Edition.