



“GOT IDOLATRY?”

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 84:1-7, LUKE 18:9-14

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

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The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block and
the Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Marcia: Richard and Samantha, where are you? It's time for the sermon. Tomorrow's Reformation Sunday. Remember, we were gonna get everyone warmed up with a close reading of Calvin's Institutes. (*come down to Richard*) Oh there you are, Richard! Are you ready?

Richard (*in pew*): Oh, no. I'm sorry Marcia. This is Presbytery. I never talk at Presbytery meetings. You're the one who likes to talk at Presbytery meetings.

Marcia: Come on, Richard, it was just that one short Presbytery meeting that I talked in. I bet no one here even remembers that anyway. You're not off the hook. You're gonna have to talk today. Here's a copy of Calvin's institutes. Come on, let's go find Samantha.

Richard: Where is Samantha? I know I saw her around here somewhere.

Marcia (*walking further*): Samantha, what are you doing? It's time for the sermon!

Sam (*Next to Bobbi White*): I'm sorry Marcia and Richard, I'm hanging out with Bobbi White, our General Presbyter! Did you know that it's her last Presbytery meeting? We have got a lot to catch up on, you all go ahead and do the Calvin thing without me.

Marcia: Don't worry Samantha, there's a reception after the meeting honoring Bobbi; there's lunch. You're gonna have plenty of time to hang out with Bobbi! Now here's your Calvin's Institutes. Let's get this show on the road!

Samantha: Oh, all right. Bye, Bobbi....

Richard: Tomorrow's Reformation Sunday. There's gotta be something relevant in Calvin for a Presbytery sermon.

Marcia: Yeah, there's a lot of good stuff in here. Hey how about his stuff on indulgences. "[On] the vile imposture, theft, and rapine with which the dealers in indulgences have hitherto deluded and sported with us." You know, on second thought, we better not go there. It's stewardship season! We don't want people to get confused.

Samantha: Here's one: Total depravity - Ugh, no, we have to deal with that every day with the news. Let's keep looking.

Richard: How about an old classic: Predestination!

Marcia: Actually I'm not even sure we believe in that any more, do we?

Jeff (from behind organ) - What? No Predestination!?! That's one of the great things about being Presbyterian!

Samantha: Hmm, seems too controversial. Better steer clear of that one.

Marcia: I know what we should do: Idolatry. That was Calvin's main issue. It was the impetus for the Reformation!

Richard: Well, if it's idolatry we're after, we better clean this place up. No paraments! Better get rid of this Christ candle!

Marcia: Richard, is that really the type of idolatry we need to look at? I mean, look at this church! It's pretty bare bones around here.

Samantha: GCPC isn't exactly known for its adornments. We don't even have stained glass.

Marcia: Stained glass? Some of these windows don't even keep the rain out!

Richard: Even if we're not talking about graven images, we need to remember why Calvin was concerned about iconography. Those were concrete symbols of the Vatican's wealth. The core of his concern wasn't the objects themselves, it was about power. The Church used its power in a way that didn't place God at the center.

Samantha: Thank goodness we don't have that problem any more. Presbyterians share power, right? That's what our polity is all about.

Marcia: Well let's not let ourselves off the hook too quickly... We don't want to be like those faith leaders in the Bible who think they got everything right.

Samantha: So, if idolatry is about giving something infinite importance, that really has limited importance--or making something other than God, into a god, what are our idols today?

(Marcia and Samantha sit down)

Richard: My barber doesn't go to church, which is my preference, but he still asks me about my work. I don't go into deep theological issues with him, because, well, I don't think he would find it especially interesting. One day, when he asked me casually why I chose to be a Presbyterian minister rather than say, a Baptist or a Methodist, I didn't want to go into the ins and outs of Reformed doctrine or polity. I just looked at him, smiled, and said, "Well, the Presbyterians had the best benefits package." And he laughed and said he understood. It was a joke, but it also felt like a half-truth.

My father spent his career as a funeral director, a job that he didn't care for. He'd often speak disparagingly about the ministers at his funerals, like, when they tried to save souls at the memorial service, or when the service ran too long. He wasn't overjoyed when I went into the ministry. But when I told him that I had decided to leave the Baptist ordination track and switch to the PCUSA, he was relieved. "You know," he said. "The Presbyterians, they always seem much more professional." I felt like I had made a good choice.

There is truth to both of these side comments. No, they aren't the first illustrations I gave to my CPM or APNC when they asked why I felt I was called to the ministry, but behind the real reasons why we do what we do, there also runs a deep current of institutionalization and professionalization. Don't get me wrong, I was happy to get graduate level training; it has served me well. I'm happy to earn a reliable pension. How rare is that today! If you look at the wall outside and all the butterflies around you, you'll see its stewardship season here at GCPC. We are all working hard to ensure the lights still work here in 2020. None of these are wrong in themselves. But do we ever mistake maintaining the institution of the church for ministry itself? Do we mistake the tools that aid us in the work of God for the work of God?

(Marcia and Samantha stand up)

Samantha: So the church itself can become an idol--we can mistake the church for God.

Richard: In our scripture today, the Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers...I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." Sometimes we work so hard to maintain our institutions, to maintain our righteousness, to secure and justify our place in this world, we forget Christ's simple message: "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Marcia: I wonder what would become of Jesus if the church ceased to exist. Us Reformed types are supposed to be less married to a static institution. Being called to have spiritual courage is humbling when you think about what we could be asked to surrender to really follow Jesus.

Richard: Especially when we are comfortable with the way things are.

Samantha: Yeah, think about it, from the earliest age, we begin to learn the rules of life: what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad, what is expected and what is intolerable. Things like: Don't touch that flame. Don't eat your sister's hair....

Richard: Don't throw your vegetables on the floor.

Marcia: Don't leave your room a total mess.

(Marcia and Richard sit down)

Samantha: Exactly. As Christians, we know that our houses of worship have their own particular flavors, populations, and unspoken (or spoken) rules. And our denomination - as a whole - has a shared understanding of how Christ's "reformed and always reforming" church can continue to be decent and in order.

But what happens when our rules become our stumbling blocks - that which keeps us from building holy community or from connecting with the One who is our purpose for gathering? It's true there are times when our rules, which are meant to share power, actually perpetuate imbalances of it. And our understandings of right and wrong can keep visitors from feeling welcome in the pews and create lines of division between congregants or between congregants and church leaders.

I remember when I was first starting out in ministry and interning at a slew of different churches. After one service at a tall-steeple church, I was greeting congregants as they were leaving. I shook hands with an older gentleman who then leaned in and said, "You know you smile too much." "Excuse me?" I asked.

“In worship, you smile too much – it’s very distracting.” “Huh?” I was unsure how to process this: was he saying I love Jesus too much? I wondered, or was there something about me that did not fit his expectations of what a pastor should look or act like?

As the season went on, I found myself keeping my mouth small, moving my arms less, even taking out my big, bright earrings before worship began. I was trying most anything to fit in, to become more subdued, more serious, more-stoic, less-Samantha. A seminary professor of mine who attended the church came up to me after worship one day and said, “You look really uncomfortable up there.” “I am,” I admitted. “I am so afraid to do something wrong.” Truth be told, each of our churches carries its own set of norms that we expect people to abide by. Even as many of our churches are shrinking or the population is growing older, we struggle to reform and take risks, to speak hard truth, to invite different forms of leadership and creativity in. Like the Pharisee in our story, our churches can idolize the way we “have always done” things. We can defend our carpet from those coffee-holding congregants and shush our children if they get too antsy in worship. We can keep away from conflict, and controversial conversations - instead remaining comfortable with the status-quo; treating opportunities to “stretch and grow” and risk everything, as second to securing a balanced budget.

(stand up)

Marcia: Idolatry can manifest when our way of being church is the only right way.

Samantha: We have got to remember that we follow a God who continues to speak, and push us away from the rules we have set, and towards our greater collective, holy purpose.

Richard: The whole reason for our polity is to share power. But if it becomes an Idol, instead of sharing power, it can become a vehicle for abusing power.

Samantha: Competency with our polity can even have the capacity to be weaponized in order to get your way.

Marcia: That's a part of our history. I've seen it happen at every level of our denomination. And it harms our ability to be beloved community.

Normalizing our way of doing things is a part of human nature. We want to know where we stand in the scheme of things. Idolatry takes that natural human tendency and attaches divine mandate and the power of God to its authority and its power. When human's mistake our own will to power and dominance for a God-given right to dominate and oppress, the church becomes a distorted, destructive shadow of itself.

On Christmas Eve 1866 in the small KY town where I grew up, an Elm tree by the Presbyterian church that reared me was used to lynch a black man who the town decided to seize from the jail and take justice into their own hands. This past Wednesday is when I learned about this lynching.

Richard and I and a group of 31 other people just returned from a pilgrimage to the lynching memorial in Montgomery, AL. I had noted that the county I grew up in did not have a monument there.

Turns out since the lynching memorial was erected, many additional lynchings have come to their attention. They will be adding to the memorial in the next year to reflect these additional examples of racial terror. I just happened to find out this week, that the place I grew up should be one of these sad additions.

In 1910 the United Daughters of the Confederacy dedicated a statue in that place honoring all soldiers who fought in the Confederacy and Robert Logan, a Confederate Officer and resident of that county. The land directly adjacent to my home church is the church's land and the Session recently voted to remove the statue and have it placed on Robert Logan's grave in the local cemetery.

Until recently, I had not realized what that statue was commemorating. I had played around it, ran past it, sat near it, walked past it over and over again since I was born and raised there.

I am grateful that the leadership of my home church has decided to acknowledge this history and relocate the statue. Many members of that church support the decision. A few have left the church over it.

Hearing the hard truth has never been easy for believers. Especially truth that surfaces the church's entanglement with violence and white supremacy. Such a clear connection between my home church and lynching and the legacy of chattel slavery and racialized terror--and I didn't see it until I was 50 years old. How much harder is it for me to see and acknowledge the subtleties of how white supremacy has been normalized and hidden in plain site in my faith journey, in my formation, in my ways of being faithful.

The truth is that part of why white supremacy culture is so hard for all of us to see--even when it is right under our noses, is because it has camouflaged itself into the way we do church, the way we make decisions, the way we understand virtue and mission and governance and good manners and the list goes on and on.

(all go to table)

John Calvin's clarion call to the faithful about the idols we worship was for us to realize how prone we are to mistake them for God.

Richard: Idolatry is about delusion.

Samantha: It is about distortion.

Marcia: In the three years we've been intentionally working to disrupt white supremacy culture within ourselves, within our congregation, and within our larger community at Grace Covenant, we've been humbled again and again by

God's generosity--we have done and continue to do harm, but God yearns for us to heal.

Samantha: And the more we trust the healing opportunities God is offering us, the more we are being transformed.

Richard: A lot is changing here at Grace Covenant--the way we do the business of the church, the way we make decisions about our mission giving, how we use our building, the language we use in worship.

Marcia: And the way we are letting the transformative power of this Table impact us is changing. Eucharist is not simply a monthly ritual, but a way of life that invites us to put Christ at the center of the way we do everything--especially the way we respond to the hard truths that reveal our brokenness and our absolute need for God's healing love.

Samantha: And so we ask: Can we humble ourselves enough to come to this table ready to be changed?

Richard: Can we come to this table as hungry as the tax collector was for God's grace?

Marcia: The gift of always reforming is that we can't forget we have a persistent penchant for idolatry.

Richard: So come hungry.

Samantha: And come humble.

Marcia: The feast is ready.

All: Thanks be to God.