

God vs. gods—Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
September 4, 2016

Every week, right after the sermon concludes, we speak together the words that the church fathers taught us: “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” One God. That’s it. We are radical monotheists, the Trinity notwithstanding. We don’t celebrate gods of rivers or trees or death or fortune. We believe in one God, no more no less. Week after week, I confess this ancient creed of the Christian faith along with all of you. But I have learned something about Christians over the years. While we only BELIEVE in one God, we WORSHIP many.

Perhaps you have found yourself worshipping at the altar of some of these gods: greed, busyness, production, expedience, or, a personal favorite, willful disregard. These vicious little gods float in and out of our lives, and if you’re anything like me, you throw them a prayer or a few dollars now and again.

We are in excellent company. Our ancestors in the faith, after being spectacularly delivered out of slavery in Egypt, were being herded by Moses through the wilderness in search of the promised land. Moses tried over and over to get the people to remember the one God, the holy God. But the Hebrews, like us, had wandering affections. They, like us, liked to keep a few little gods on the side. What’s another golden calf, more or less? Moses rebukes the people, saying, “If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.”

And we know how the story goes. The Hebrews wander and wander but then do return to God and do find their way into the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey.

But memories are short and people, as a rule, are weak. Those other gods are persistent and noisy. We brought them with us into the promised land. Prophet after prophet begged us to return to God—to give up the worship of these false deities that so often destroy our communities: gods of war, poverty, domination, xenophobia. The Israelites burned offerings to all these gods at one time or another.

The Prayer Books adds some poetry to the story: At the Eucharist, the priest speaks to the one God, saying, “From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. You made us the rulers of creation. But we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another. (*Have mercy, Lord, for we are sinners in your sight.*) Again and again, you called us to return. Through prophets and sages you revealed your righteous Law.”

Some lessons, it seems, have to be learned over and over and over again.

Jesus, talking to a large crowd of his followers says, “none of you can be my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” What do you want to bet that got everyone’s attention. I imagine it’s getting the attention of most of us sitting here this morning. None of you can be my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

This entire passage in the gospel of Luke seems to be about the futility of half measures—the impossibility of following Jesus just a little bit. Jesus seems to be picking up on a theme from Moses. Namely, those other gods have got to go. You cannot follow Jesus while your heart is fixed on pride or possessions or power. If you are worshipping at these altars, there is no room for the worship of God.

I find this hard to listen to. I often let my mind be distracted from our just and holy God by fixating on myself, on my comfort, on my accumulation. It’s very easy to do. My mind wandered away from God this morning before church, and I imagine my mind will wander away from God later today at brunch.

So, yes, Jesus reproaches us to shed foolish and dangerous allegiances that cling to us, that grab our attention. Jesus teaches that there is a cost to discipleship—a cost to following. And that cost is the rejection of those things that bar us from union with God.

And it hurts a little. Giving up these artificial things hurts a little. And it’s certainly a process. And, if the Israelites are any indication, it’s a lesson that we are forced to learn over and over again. We like to worship the other gods, I think, because they they tell us that they don’t demand too much from us. But that’s a lie. When we devote our entire lives to being distracted, the petty little gods have taken everything.

So, allow yourself to feel challenged by the bold words of Jesus today. Allow yourself to be challenged by the bold words of Moses. They are bracing; they are hard to hear. And in them is a wisdom that we need to encounter in this world where we have so many choices about which gods we want to worship.

There is a reason that we have to say that creed every week. There’s a reason that we have to stand next to each other and say, “We believe in one God, the Father almighty.” We have to say it so often because it’s tremendously easy to forget. I’d much rather follow gods that promise youth and beauty and painlessness. But, upon sober reflection, the price is too high.

Jesus and Moses both had some things to say today that are hard to hear. But sometimes, the bracing words of Jesus are the precise words we need to hear to remind us to return, time and time again, to our one God. It sounds like a rebuke, but I call it grace—a deliverance from the petty gods that mean to do us harm. Amen.