

MODERN IDOL-MAKING

Third in series, Ten Commandments Revisited The Second Commandment

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
January 20, 1985

Last week I pointed out the intriguing coincidence that the second commandment sermon--against idol making--falls on Super Bowl Sunday. Especially are we conscious of Super Bowl today: newspapers are printing little else; souvenirs everywhere; and, something to celebrate, the home team is one of the teams playing today. Is the Super Bowl an example of idol worship?

Let's define idol-making according to the second commandment. Idol-making is the desire to design a god on our terms, a god that will fit our perceptions and satisfy our needs. The main point of the first commandment is, "Do not put something or someone above God. Let God be # 1." The main point of the second commandment is, "Do not make up a god to fit you."

Moses had quite a task in the wilderness after he led the slaves out of Egypt. He had to form a people. He organized them, taught them, developed leadership, led worship, and gave them a code, laws, a way of life. Over the years, he gave them a body of laws, some of which no longer apply to us at all; but the basic code is still relevant; namely, the Ten Commandments. The people accepted his leadership and received the commandments in joy with a burst of enthusiasm, and a loyal oath. In Exodus 24:3, they responded, "We will observe all the commandments that God has decreed."

But, how soon they forgot their promise. How quickly the burst of enthusiasm popped like a balloon, and they felt afraid, abandoned, and confused. Moses had gone back up the mountain to wait upon the Lord. He had gone up the holy mountain to sort things out, get inspired, renew his confidence. Evidently, Mt. Sinai is an awesome spectacle, with jagged rocks, high cliffs. The top of the mountain is usually covered with clouds where, tradition told them, God sits. Have any of you visited Mt. Sinai? A businessman once told Mark Twain, "Before I pass on, I plan to take a trip to the Holy Land, climb Mt. Sinai, and read the Ten Commandments." To which Mark Twain, in his usual inimitable outspoken manner, responded, "I have a better idea. Why don't you stay home and keep them?"

Anyway, Moses remained on the mountain forty days, and the people felt abandoned. They went to Aaron and demanded, "Make us a god." So Aaron collected gold earrings from the women and made a gold calf. It was probably a bull, as bulls had a prominent place in the religious practices of ancient Egypt and the near East in general. It was probably made of wood with a gold inlay. The bull was intended either to be an image of God or a pedestal upon which God could sit.

At any rate, Moses was quite displeased when he came down from the mountain, for the second commandment had clearly been broken. Moses broke the tablets to signify that the covenant had been broken. And, he destroyed the calf.

Why did they make a graven image? Why did they break the commandment and make a calf? What is there in human nature--or in our sin, rather--that tempts people to make their own gods? Why do people make idols? I see three reasons in the episode of the golden calf.

First, they found that living by faith was too frightening and threatening. They desired security. They felt they had lost their leader. He had gone up the mountain. They did not like Moses' style of leadership, and they complained to Aaron in Exodus 32:1, "Make us a god...as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land

of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Moses wasn't visible enough for them; they were insecure. They did not like being left on their own resources. They wanted to see, to touch. They wanted a god they could possess.

Last Friday evening I heard John Naisbitt speak. He is the author of Megatrends and is releasing in September a new book, Reinventing the Corporation. These are exciting times as we change from an industrial society to an informational society, where the hierarchical, authoritarian, pyramid structures are crumbling, and even business corporations are reorganizing along horizontal lines with decentralized management, with networks rather than vertical lines of authority. He observes that people are ready for this drastic change. He sees a growing expression of self-reliance, self-management, and, at the same time, a desire for commitment. People want to do something worthwhile. People want to succeed and are willing to commit themselves, invest and extend themselves in a company or a cause.

But, some are not ready to live by self-reliance, by faith. They like to be told what to do. They want order and structure. They look for security. They want a god they can see, touch, or, at least, a god and a church that gives them order, stability, security, that tells them what to do. The changing economic order from authoritarian to democratic is a frightening experience for many, so they look for a golden calf; they create an idol, a god, to give them order. They want security.

Secondly, they made an idol in an attempt to control God. To manipulate God is the purpose of the idol. Ancient people did not easily make the distinction between an image and that which the image represents. We know the difference between a flag and the nation that the flag represents. We know the difference between the cross and God whom the cross represents. But, the ancients did not see the distinction, so the holding, or touching, or seeing of an image of God meant that the power of God was in their control, for they were in possession of the god.

To put it in terms of the covenant, they felt they could manipulate God by doing what was expected. They could bribe God. This is a temptation especially for modern church people. How often have you heard someone say, "I don't know why I am sick, or have troubles, or have cancer. I've worked faithfully in the church. I've obeyed the commandments. I've tried to live a good life. I've never intentionally hurt anyone. So, why am I suffering?" Do you see the subtlety? They are attempting to bribe God, attempting to manipulate God, but God won't be manipulated. "Do not make a graven image" means "Do not think you can possess God, or control or manipulate or bribe God."

Thirdly, another reason for the making of an idol, they wanted to create a fantasy god, a make-believe world, where they could frolic. An idol--a fantasy religion--then becomes an escape from life. What happens is that in response to stress, some create a fantasy land (By the way, John Naisbitt calls Washington, D.C., "the world's largest theme park.") where they can escape. Their religion becomes an escape from life, rather than a means, a challenge, a basis from which to live one's life.

In Exodus 32:6, we read, "And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." After the golden calf was made and worshipped, then they rose up to play. Now, there are times for play. Unlike our puritan ancestors whose religion denounced festivals, feasts and play, there is a time for play. There is a time for release. There is a need in everyone's life for a Super Bowl. We all need sports, entertainment, fun. Our bodies and minds need rest (the fourth commandment).

Idol-making creates and concocts fantasy gods, a fantasy religion, where one does not relate to the real world, or confront one's life. Idol-making creates gods that demand nothing, that offer no challenge, that pat us on the head and say, "Whatever you feel, baby."

We prefer a god who is inoffensive, watered-down, undemanding. A guest was asked to preach in the church of one of the famous television preachers whom millions watch every Sunday. On the way from the airport, the guest received these instructions: "People worship with us in order to feel good about themselves. Therefore, don't mention the cross in your sermon. And don't dwell too much on sin. And don't mention the John Birch Society." I don't imagine that church includes a Prayer of Confession in its worship. They just want to feel good, some Disneyland type of religion. Banish the God of the Bible, the God of judgment, the God of the Ten Commandments, the God who demands that we be socially conscious, responsible, and concerned about people and the planet.

These are exciting days--living at the end of the industrial society and at the beginning of the new informational society--where people with self-reliance, confidence and commitment will be winners. The second commandment is relevant. Don't create your own god, or worship any god less than the one who made you, the one who gave you great gifts and talents, the one who calls you to live out your potential, to be the best, to do the best you can. Don't be content with a god or a church that demands nothing and expects little. The God of the Bible, the God of Jesus Christ, demands that you be your best, and when you fail, he meets you in tenderness and compassion to forgive you and send you on your way again.

Do not seek to control God. Do not seek to create some inoffensive god of popular religion. Don't forsake our God for anything less. You shall not make for yourself any graven image.

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DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

JANUARY 20, 1985