

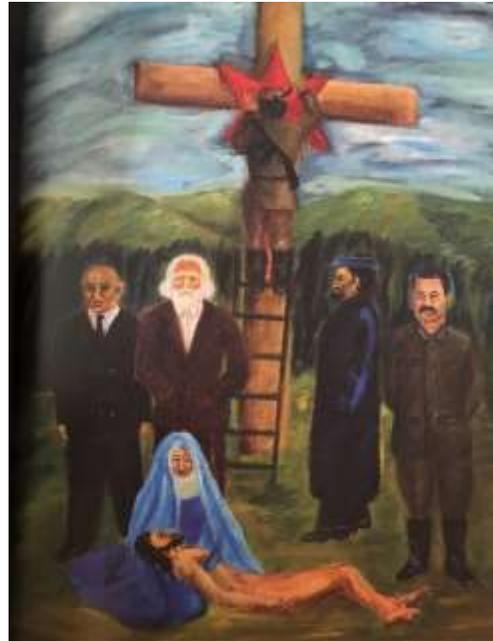
Third Sunday After Pentecost  
10 June 2018

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

**II Corinthians 4:5-12**  
**I Samuel 8: 1-20**

### **I Am the Lord Your God**

Up to this point in their time in Canaan, the Hebrew people have all lived in separate territories, and have never been united. They have lived under the rule of Samuel as judge and who, recently, has put his sons in his place as judges. They have failed miserably by misusing their roles, and the people demand a human king like other nations have. Samuel is disappointed by the people's choice and thinks it's a reflection on him as a judge. God tells Samuel that Israel is really thinking about replacing God with a king rather than Samuel... which makes Samuel feel better about himself, but not about the situation.



Painting by Csanyi Janos depicts the experience of a Communist controlled society. Standing beneath the cross are Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Engels. Mary holds Jesus as a soldier replaces Jesus' leadership with a Communist star.

Samuel attempts to tell the Israelites that a king will only turn them into slaves instead of making them united. Their people will be used to make war and serve the king in the king's palace. They will lose the freedoms they enjoy. The people think this is stupid and ignore Samuel. They want a king to govern them and fight their battles, and God tells Samuel to give the people what they want and to find a king. God tells Samuel to anoint Saul as king.

Samuel has warned them that they will have "buyer's remorse," but they do not listen. How often we have been disappointed in just such a way.

I will begin this morning with two preliminary comments:

1) I'm suggesting that if you are uncomfortable with today's bulletin cover, you should be. I spoke with several of you before deciding to go ahead with this disturbing picture of the lordship...the leadership... of Jesus Christ being replaced by a Communist star. The image, in the artist's eye, reveals the impression that many people had under Communist occupation in parts of Europe in the mid-20th century: that Communism was to be considered central to and hold priority over anything else in their lives...and that included religion. It is no wonder that religious worship was denounced...even punished in some cases...and that people got used to losing their land, their possessions and even their lives in service to "the star." I learned, during my time in Hungary recently, that whether one feared Communism or welcomed it as the better alternative to being ruled by the Nazis, many continued to prioritize their faith...to depend upon it actually...in spite of the mandates against such prioritizing.

2) Susan's sermon last week emphasized Psalm 139 with its focus on the bigness/vastness of God, such that there is nowhere that any of us can go where God is not...even to the farthest limits of the earth, the depths of the sea, or the highest heavens themselves. It is in the face of such conviction on the part of the psalmist, and our own professed beliefs, that today's message flies. For in spite of our professions of faith in such a Lord, and loving Savior, we still manage to replace God with other things. In this country, certainly not a Communist star, but other things, nonetheless, are/can be substitutes for God and perhaps equally demanding of our devotion. This isn't to say that we don't agree with the sentiments of the psalmist in Psalm 138: "great is the glory of the Lord." Not at all. And the psalms are filled with such declarations of God's greatness. But what about those times when that "great glory of the Lord" is challenged by those "things" that we ascribe value to ... that we invest time and energy to on a daily basis? Those times when "the great glory of the Lord" challenges us to let go of or sacrifice those other things that are of value to us? I resonate with the title of Greg Dutcher's little book, "You are the treasure that I seek. But there's a lot of cool stuff out there, Lord." Cool stuff that claims our attention and our time and our loyalty.

There is, I believe, a very fine line between idolizing and idealizing. Such a fine line that I like to think about idols not so much as things of the golden calf variety but, rather, as anything that takes our attention/loyalty/devotion away from prioritizing God as the center of our lives... things—or people—that we persistently/religiously tend to, and love, and protect at all costs, even though such focus draws our attention away from prioritizing God in devotion and worship. The thing is that this can be subtle...so subtle that we often don't even notice that it has happened.

You see, it is easy to recognize idols when they are in the form of graven images...probably not a lot of that going on in our community. These are easy to condemn. The *real* challenge though is being able to name the things that we love to value or idealize, especially *appropriately* value, which quietly move into those sacred spaces that should be reserved for God. When I met with the Wednesday Bible Study group this week I asked them what they thought were the idols of our time. The first response was the Ravens, and then the Caps... "labels by which we define and identify ourselves." Someone else said ministers... I hope not...social media...someone else said, "All of our stuff." These all indeed take up our time and our attention...often to the exclusion of time and attention paid to prayer and worship, I suspect. And we can laugh at ourselves for this seemingly frivolous indulgence. But it quickly gets more complicated when those "idols" are identified with things that are truly and appropriately close to our hearts...like country and family and hard work ... and our children.

God has a right to our whole being. There is nothing that should be supreme in our affections but God. And yet, these last things we just identified...country, family, hard work and children, are paramount to us. And here's where, as we say in the South, I'm going to quit preachin' and go to meddlin'. I'm going to focus on one of these, children, because so much of my sabbatical was around exploring ways to build resilience in children...to cultivate resilience/the ability to bounce back from adversity rather than give up on the young people in our community. There are clearly other things that we may idealize/idolize but this is one near and dear to my heart.

We love our children as we should...and we should continue to do so as much as we please. I'll even agree that there is a difference between over-indulging them and idealizing them. I'd also say that I wish some parents in our country loved their kids *more* than they do. But when a line gets crossed where care and overprotection of them rivals the care and protection of our love of and faithfulness to God, then we are in trouble. We are moving into idol territory.

What is the first step across that line in any move toward idolizing? I think it's "exemption"...when we start exempting ourselves or anyone else but, for our purposes here, especially our children, from responsibility, from obedience, discipline...the list is long but includes attempted exemption from suffering and the consequences of our own, or their, actions.

I learned from my family and others in formerly Nazi occupied and Communist occupied areas, that you can, with the help of God, find something good that emerges from even the worst of situations. What they found was that the consequences of negative experiences/consequences of suffering, yield lessons that may equip us for life. This is especially true if we believe that we ourselves or those we love should be exempt from paying the price for poor choices or decisions. In contemporary language those people are termed "entitled" or "all that," and it's not good.

When we avoid or enable avoidance of consequences for another, we rob them of the life lessons that equip them as adults. I chose this clip from the Andy Griffith show (where better to get life lessons than from Sheriff Andy Taylor) so we could see how it works. In this episode, a privileged young man of 19 speeds through Mayberry NC in his convertible on his way to Florida and runs a vegetable truck off the road. Andy and Barney catch up to him and arrest him, even as he protests and threatens that his father, an influential state politician, will take their badges. The young man is taken to jail to await the arrival of a judge who can determine the punishment...a wait which will take three days. Of course, the next day is Sunday and jail closes, so he must go to Andy's home for Sunday dinner...along with Barney, Aunt Bea and Opie. This scene occurs on the front porch immediately after supper.

VIDEO (Opie confesses to his dad that he broke a window. Andy talks to Opie about how he thinks he can earn the money he needs to pay for the window he broke. Overhearing this conversation, the privileged young speeder tells Andy that he thinks he should go easy on Opie. Andy gives the young man a lesson in accountability.)

You see how easily it happens? Exemption from the law. Exemption from responsibility. Both so simple to allow, especially when the things valued by us are at stake. And the list of the stuff that is valued by us is endless.

And they are not new or original to us. In the 19th century, sermons often addressed the need to keep oneself from idols such as "worshiping ourselves, our wealth, the pursuits we undertake and our dearest relatives and friends." These were added to a lengthy list of "idols of the hour" as they were called. All of these claim us as well to varying degrees. But why? Well, according to Greg Dutcher, whose book I named earlier, it is because everybody's looking for something. There's even a song with that refrain, right? What we are looking for is some kind of fulfillment and ultimate contentment that will allow us to stop searching, or to fill a nagging emptiness inside, or to fill up internal dead space, or get rid of anxiety that keeps us awake at night. You can name your own space to be filled. And the filler often comes in the form of something that

we begin then to idolize/idealize. It has that kind of “if only” character to it I think: “If only the Caps win, then things will be good. If only I get this job, that house, the new car...if only I could meet the right person and get married, or out of debt, or if only I could afford this or that.” “If only, then” causes us to continuously search for something even if we can’t specifically identify it.

Maybe it is not surprising that so many of Jesus’ parables emphasize the searching for and finding of treasure. The lost coin, found by the woman after she’s scoured her house looking for it, because it is of great value to her; the shepherd who leaves his whole flock to look for the one sheep that was missing; and then, of course, the treasure buried by a man in a field who then sells everything he has in order to buy the field, so that he may get the treasure back. Everybody’s looking for something. Looking for the treasure that will change their lives. In Jesus’ case he tells us that the treasure we seek is to be found in faithfulness to God and that he, Jesus, has come to give away the treasure map. Anything else, tempting and important as it might be, is a counterfeit Savior.

In our I Samuel text today, the something everybody is looking for is a better ruler/a king. They are effectively saying, “If only we had a human king like other nations do, we would at last have what we have been searching for.” Recall that I said we should be uncomfortable with the bulletin cover. So many things are wrong about it, but the obvious replacement of Christ with something else is the most egregious. And we have to ask ourselves if there are idols of our own making...treasures in our own hearts that could replace, even if for a brief time, Jesus’ lordship/God’s kingship on that Cross. And if there are...if things come to mind, then it’s time to take a hard look at this Samuel text. Time to take it really seriously. It has been said that “the worst enemies to a person are those within his own heart,” and this is why: they may cause one to believe that he or she is exempt from the laws of God that govern those hearts. Put another way, we may begin to believe that we are exempt from God’s claim on our lives and, therefore, God’s call to us.

Samuel is told by God to give the people what they want; to give them a human king. In the chapter that follows this one, God even selects who that king will be. “Go anoint Saul,” God instructs Samuel. But Saul is more than reluctant, believes himself to be exempt from God’s call for whatever reason, and so he hides...hides literally behind some baggage or something.

And we do likewise...hiding behind all of our stuff. Stuff that we have invested in so that it replaces God’s lordship in our lives. Whether it is good or unhealthy, if it takes the place of a prioritizing of God, it is in the category of idols.

We hide behind our stuff in addictions, bad luck, broken homes, disabilities, poor economies and broken hearts. We hide behind our busy-ness, our obligations to family, friends, work and even the church. We hide behind our children. Hiding behind our stuff implies that we believe ourselves to be exempt from whatever God might have in mind for us in deference to our idolizing/idealizing the stuff that we value...the things that we treasure.