

Trinity United Methodist Church

October 6, 2019

“First: The Competition”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: 2 Kings 17:35-41

When the Lord made a covenant with the Israelites, he commanded them: “Do not worship any other gods or bow down to them, serve them or sacrifice to them. But the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt with mighty power and outstretched arm, is the one you must worship. To him you shall bow down and to him offer sacrifices. You must always be careful to keep the decrees and regulations, the laws and commands he wrote for you. Do not worship other gods. Do not forget the covenant I have made with you, and do not worship other gods. Rather, worship the Lord your God; it is he who will deliver you from the hand of all your enemies.” They would not listen, however, but persisted in their former practices. Even while these people were worshiping the Lord, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their ancestors did.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Mike Slaughter is the now-retired pastor from Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Tipp City, Ohio, one of the largest United Methodist Churches in our denomination. He tells the story in one of his books of how he once asked the congregation there to holler out what or who they thought he was most passionate about. Being that he’s a pastor and a preacher, he was hoping that they might say, “Jesus,” or maybe “church,” maybe “family” or something like that. Instead, the whole congregation shouted out in unison, “baseball,” because of how much he talked about it.

If I were to do the same here, which I won’t do, by the way, because I’m not that brave, I imagine I would hear responses like “Hokie football” or the Hokies in general.

Go Hokies, by the way – what a win yesterday. If you know me well enough, you might say “bourbon,” even though I didn’t go yesterday to the Fest. And if there’s anything else you think I’m most passionate about, tell me after church.

But thinking of and answering that question is a good way to ask ourselves and ask those around us, what are we most passionate about? And asking that question helps us get at, furthermore, who and what do we put *first* in our lives? There was a time in my life where my weekend was literally scheduled – and this was after I graduated from Tech – around what time the game was on Saturday or whatever point during the weekend.

What do we put first in our lives? Who do we put first in our lives? Now, in general, we know what we’re *supposed* to put first in our lives and *who* we’re supposed to put first in our lives. At least, I hope so. Family, maybe our spouse, our relationships with friends as well. But unfortunately, life has a way of taking over. And as we go through life, we need something called “money” to get through much of life, and that so easily can become priority number one, for indeed sometimes it seems like we can never have enough of it. Maybe our jobs or our careers become first and foremost in our lives. Certainly going through school, even as a teenager, the all-important pressure to get into college is so intense that it becomes school and the all-important GPA above all else. Maybe sports and extracurricular activities for the college resume` becomes priority number one.

But as we go through life, soon enough what really matters begins to take a back seat to what is more urgent but ultimately might not matter as much, though, in the long run. And over time, worry begins to creep in. We worry that we don’t have enough. We worry that we aren’t doing enough. And it can easily take over and consume us, even if we try hard to fight against it. Worry can isolate us from each other if we let it and ultimately isolate us from God.

And that’s the context in which we find the theme for this October sermon series called “First.” Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount. He covered a range of topics in Matthew chapters 5 through 7. And in the middle, He speaks about treasure, about money. Indeed, Jesus had more to say about money and possessions and how we are related to them than he did about anything else. Jesus tells us, “Don’t store up treasures on earth, but in heaven, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” But He spoke about, then, the problem of serving two masters, that eventually you’ll love one and hate the other. And then He point-blank says, “you can’t serve both God and money.” And I imagine as that first audience was just about to say, “Yeah, *but, Jesus...*,” He immediately launched into this section on worry. “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” Jesus asked. “Look at nature. Look at how splendid and wonderful nature is. If God can take care of all of that, don’t worry about

the basic necessities, like what we will eat or drink or wear.” Jesus said, “the pagans do that. Everyone else around us worries like that.”

Friends, one of the central themes throughout the entire Bible is *don't be like everyone else*. Jesus says, “but first – *first* – seek God's kingdom and His righteousness, and then all these things will be given to you as well.” Seek God's kingdom first. Seek God's *will* first. Seek God's *presence* first. And everything else will fall into place.

So that seems easy enough, right? I can hear you singing the song in your heads: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God...” Right? If only it was that easy. Because we have competition, friends.

Paul reminds us in Ephesians that our struggle is not merely in the physical realm which we can observe with our senses, but our struggle is also in the spiritual realm. And our spiritual struggle plays out in the physical by pulling us away from God, making us “too busy” for God because of all the worries that we run around worrying about. It pulls us away from His presence and His kingdom.

The spiritual struggle is evident even still today in demonic activity. But before you think, “Whew! At least I haven't seen any demons lately. I must be off the hook,” realize that it's rarely that obvious. Spiritual warfare is more often in the imperceptible temptations to idolatry. Now, often when we think of idolatry, we think of people praying, bowing down to a statue or worshipping trees or praying to some inanimate object. But again, it's usually not that obvious, either.

Mike Slaughter, in his book *Shiny Gods*, defines an idol as “anything or anyone that receives the primary focus of my energy and resources which should first belong to God.” An idol is *anything or anyone that receives the primary focus of my energy or resources which should first belong to God*.

So how do we know if we're doing that or not? Well, there's a form of prayer called The Examine, by which we examine our lives every morning and every evening. There's a set of questions to go through; questions like, “Where did I experience God today? Was I even aware of God's presence with me today? Where was an opportunity to serve God and others today, and did I follow through with that opportunity or not?” And the idea is you might journal through these questions so that you get better about these things over time.

And one of those questions that convicts me every time I run across it when I observe this practice is this: Was God my first thought upon waking and my last thought upon going to sleep? Now, if you're like me, many nights you lay down in bed and your brain all of a sudden decides to turn on. It might have been shut off all day long, but all of a sudden you put your head on the pillow and *then* it comes alive. And you go

through the, “Oh, yeah, I forgot to do this today,” and “oh, I need to do that,” and “oh, yeah, the wife’s mad at me ‘cause of this,” and whatever it might be. So you think, “I’ll do this tomorrow, and I’ll do that tomorrow, and what are we having for dinner, and do I need to run to the grocery store,” and et cetera, et cetera. And soon enough you might drift off to sleep, and God certainly has not crossed our minds. And some of us might think, “well, at least I address God in the morning...when my alarm goes off and I say, ‘Oh God, it’s morning.’” But that’s not quite thinking upon God first and foremost, either.

Anything or anyone that receives the primary focus of my energy or resources which should first belong to God is an idol. Really? *Anyone?* But surely not my family! You don’t mean my family...my kids...my grandkids. My friends. *Anyone? Really?*

Mark Driscoll, another pastor and author, puts it this way: “Idols are good things that we turn into God things, and that’s a bad thing.” Idols are *good* things that we turn into *God* things, and that’s a *bad* thing. In other words, an idol is something which could be very good, but we put in the place of God, first and foremost in our lives, and that is the bad thing.

For instance, when pastors and church leaders get upset about families missing church because of kids’ sports on Sundays, it’s more than us worrying about a drop in attendance on those Sundays, although that is part of it. But could it be a sign that we’re placing more importance on our kids and their activities and turning these very good things into God things? And if so, what lesson are we really teaching our kids by doing so? It’s like we worship God, but we maybe serve some idols, too.

And it happened in the Bible, as well. In our scripture lesson for today we read that it comes at the end of how the northern kingdom of Israel, whose capital was in Samaria, fell. The political reason was that the king of Israel was aligned with the king of Assyria and he got disenchanted with that, so he tried making a political alliance with the king of Egypt. The king of Assyria didn’t like that, said that’s the last straw, I’m done with you, invaded, conquered everything and everybody, and took everybody back to Assyria. But remember, the struggles that we face in this world aren’t just political, but they’re spiritual as well. When the king of Assyria took all those Israelites into captivity, he resettled the area with his own Assyrian people as a way to maintain control in that area. But they didn’t know to worship God. And so God sent lions among them, and these lions devoured some of these people. So they hollered out to the king of Assyria; the king sent out these Israelite priests to try to teach these Assyrians how to worship God and what God required, including the first of the Ten Commandments, that God is to be worshiped alone. There are no other gods before Him. But we read, “But they would not listen, but they persisted in their former practices.” Even while these people were worshipping the Lord, they were still serving their idols. “To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their ancestors did.”

Well, friends, I don't think I'm descended from any Samaritan people, as far as I know, and maybe you might not be, either. But certainly we're all spiritual descendants of these folks. For even we keep turning *good* things into *God* things, and that's still a bad thing. Because the Bible tells us that we become what we worship. We become *like* what we worship. In Psalm 135, "the idols of the nations are silver and gold made by human hands. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see, ears but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them. So will all who trust in them."

You see, friends, the more that we seek even the best things first instead of God, soon enough, spiritually at least, we won't be able to speak, or see, or hear, or breathe. Our personal wells will dry up and we won't have anything left to give to others. Our fuses become shorter. We become more critical of others. And Lord knows, our patience certainly goes right out the window. In fact, we might say that the fruit of the Spirit becomes practically nonexistent. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Are any of these missing in your life? And who, or what, are you seeking first?

Because, you see, idols will never deliver what they promise. So we must identify and eliminate the competition that we face in our lives. To ask in prayer, "God, is there *anything* that is competing for first place in my life with you?" And then to pray for strength and courage to root it out.

Because the good news is that this is what Jesus meant by "pruning" in John chapter 15. The part where He said, "I am the vine, you are the branches," and God is the gardener. And the gardener comes along and entirely cuts off the branches that aren't producing anything, but even the branches that are producing a little bit of fruit, what does He do? He prunes them. You know what pruning is, right? It's cutting, still. It's tearing away. You think the plant likes that? You think that feels good to the plant, to be cut and torn up like that? It certainly doesn't feel good when God does that in our lives. But it must happen so that we might bear even greater fruit, as we seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness.

And it doesn't mean that we have to completely abandon those very good things in our lives. It just means that we have to keep putting first things first. Keep the main thing *the main thing*.

Seek first the kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these other things will fall into their proper place.

Thanks be to God. Amen.