

## McCabe United Methodist Church

The Idols We Love: A Holy Tug-of-War  
Lent 2017, Sermon and Worship Series

### **“Entertainment: An Idol to Fill the “Empty”**

Sermon on John 6:1-15, 22-35 (March 11 & 12, 2017)

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“See if you can imagine this one. People arrive hours early for church. On Sunday mornings, they don't just set a backup alarm clock to assure they wake up in time; they set a backup for the backup. They arrange their schedules to make sure they don't miss gathering for worship. Throughout the week, they talk about what happened on the previous Sunday as excitement builds for the upcoming church service...

“When Sunday comes, the members start loading up their trucks, SUVs, and sedans hours before the service starts. 'Hurry,' says Dad frantically. 'We're behind again.' 'It's 6:00am,' says Mom. 'Church doesn't start for five hours.' “Last time we left at this time, we had to park three miles from the sanctuary and sit in the nosebleed seats...”

“The roads are really congested on the way to church, no matter how early you leave. At church, there are vehicles parked as far as the eye can see, and folks are out tailgating. Some...[break] out portable grills and lawn chairs in the church parking lot...

“It's nice weather today, not that it matters. Even in the dead of winter, they'll be out here in the same numbers. The masses begin filing into the sanctuary, cheering with great passion and excitement...

“Of course, a bunch of young guys are in the front row. They've probably been here since Friday night. They have no shirts, and each one has a letter on his chest. Together they spell GET YOUR TITHE ON.

“Apparently, the rumor has gotten out that the pastor is indeed going to teach on biblical stewardship and worshiping God with our money. Everyone is *pumped* for the giving sermon.

“It's one of the highlights of the year. After several hours, people start looking at their watches. Everyone is thinking the same thing: 'I hope the sermon goes into overtime!’”<sup>1</sup>

That imagined, Sunday-morning, pre-worship sequence was written by pastor and author Kyle Idleman. His silly bit of imagining serves as the start of a chapter called “The God of Entertainment” in his book *Gods at War*<sup>2</sup> – the book that is shaping our sermon and worship series here at McCabe during this season of Lent.

We're calling the series *The Idols We Love: A Holy Tug-of-War...* because that's what idols do: they create a tug-of-war inside of us – a tug-of-war that has God Almighty pulling one end of the rope, our favorite idols pulling the other end, with our heart in the middle, feeling the brunt of the pressure.

In the Old Testament of the Bible, in the book of Exodus, the people of Israel – God's holy, chosen people – created their first idol wandering around in the desert, en route to their promised land, after years of slavery in Egypt. One day, Israel's leader, Moses, went up to the top of Mt. Sinai to have a lengthy conversation with God. In the midst of this conversation, God gave Moses all the commandments of the religious law – including the Big Ten we know and love.

The first of those commandments was, *“I am the Lord your God, the one who brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves. Do not worship any god except me.”* And the second commandment was, *“Do not make idols that look like anything in the sky or on the earth or in the ocean under the earth. Don't bow down and worship idols. I am the Lord your God and I demand all your love.”*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Idleman, Kyle. *Gods at War: Defeating the Idols That Battle for Your Heart* (Zondervan, 2013) 113-114.

<sup>2</sup> Idleman 113

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:2-5

Some translations of the Bible phrase that one like this: *“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...”*  
*“For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.”*<sup>4</sup>

Jealousy is the fear of losing something that belongs to you. We are God's beloved children – creations from God's own heart. God guides us; God brings us through hardship into seasons of joy and light. We belong to God and God deserves the fullness of our love and devotion. But we are imperfect reflections of God's perfect image.

From the very start, we humans have allowed idols to pull our hearts away from our Creator God. When God was giving Moses the commandments, the rest of God's people got restless at the base of the mountain...and that's when they made their first idol: they melted their gold and formed it into a golden calf they then made the object of their worship.<sup>5</sup>

*“Do not make idols that look like anything in the sky or on the earth or in the ocean under the earth. Don't bow down and worship idols, for I, the Lord, am a jealous God.”*<sup>6</sup>

Centuries ago, St. Augustine wrote these words: “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”<sup>7</sup>  
*“Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”*

We belong to God. God is *jealous* for us. And there is a holy tug-of-war on our hearts... idols all around that attempt to pull our primary allegiance away from the God who loves us – the God who *deserves* our love, worship, and allegiance.

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:4-5 New Living Translation (NLT)

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 32:1-6 NLT

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 20:4-5 New American Bible (Revised Edition) (NABRE)

<sup>7</sup> <http://thinkexist.com/quotation/thou-hast-made-us-for-thyself-o-lord-and-our/347709.html>

My husband, Derrick, is a huge New York Yankees fan. When we got married just over a year ago, and he moved-into the parsonage with me, it wasn't long before we started talking about making the south wall of our basement family room into a "Yankees Wall."

(Those of you who hate the New York Yankees, I'm going to kindly ask that you do your best to set that hatred aside for the next few minutes.)

The wall in question is 13 feet wide, and, not long after the Major-League Baseball season began last April, Derrick and I began to brainstorm. We could paint the wall Yankees blue!

We could hang pieces of white trellis across the top of the wall that resemble the white trellis that hangs at Yankee Stadium! Imagine how great it would be to watch Yankees games on the 55-inch TV that sets against *that wall*: it would be almost like sitting in Yankee Stadium... sigh!

Our project got delayed for various reasons over the course of the last year, but, by the end of last summer, we had painted the wall "Yankees Blue" ... and, then, in the last few weeks, we took a couple of other significant steps to finish the project.

In late February, we ordered the white, wooden trellis pieces that will emulate the Yankee Stadium facade... *and*, right around that time, my husband found something online for which he had been searching since the fall of 2014: he found a limited edition, Derek Jeter bat from Jeter's last All-Star game in July of 2014 – and it was autographed.

Not only does my husband love Derek Jeter, but he and his son were actually *at* Derek Jeter's last All-Star game July of 2014.

Having the bat would commemorate his favorite player *and* a great father-son experience. So, we bought it. As you might imagine, the bat was not inexpensive. None of our Yankees Wall décor was inexpensive. But we didn't spend grocery or tithe and offering money to buy any of it, so... no big deal, right?

Fast-forward to Ash Wednesday a week-and-a-half ago. I'm preaching my Ash Wednesday sermon and my wonderful, reflective husband is sitting out in the congregation listening.

In that sermon – as I did earlier in *this* sermon – I reiterated the second commandment that we are not to make idols... that we are not to bow down and worship those idols. And then I said this:

“I am rather confident that most of us here are not at risk of making a literal idol to be the object of our worship. I'm rather confident that most of us do not make a habit of creating our own golden calves and then bowing down to them in worship.”

As I said that during my Ash Wednesday sermon a week-and-a-half ago, my wonderful, reflective husband squirmed a bit in his seat. He told me later that night, he couldn't help but think about our Yankees Wall: it isn't a golden calf, but it will certainly toe the “idol” line.

It hadn't occurred to *me* that our Yankees Wall is idol-like, but that's probably because the New York Yankees do not tug at my heart and my allegiance in the same way they do my husband. And I would imagine some of you can understand – even if you hate the Yankees!

Perhaps you frequently look forward to sporting events far more than you look forward to times of worship and devotion at church. Perhaps you have found your day – or your week or your month – ruined when *your* team doesn't win. If that sounds like you, perhaps the god of sports' entertainment is an idol you worship.

Now, those of us who are not sports nuts may be sitting here feeling a bit smug. Like, “Hey, I care very little about sports! No idol-worship for me!”

Well, I married into a love of Yankees baseball... and I enjoy watching football and basketball... but, sports, generally, are not one of my idols. That is *not* to say, however, that I do not *have* idols.

In order for me to identify a holy tug-of-war on *my* heart, I have to start reflecting on my love of clothes and accessories... or on the hours I can spend blowing through favorite TV shows on Hulu or Netflix.

Sure, my clothes already fill an entire closet, plus a large chest of drawers, and sure I don't wear half of what I have, but what's a few more dresses or another couple pairs of leggings? Or... sure I've already mindlessly watched 5 episodes of *The Golden Girls* or *Friends*, but what's another one or two if there's nothing else I *need* to be doing...?

Granted, there are *books* that could be read or exercise that could be done or games that could be played with my family, but, but, but...

It may come as no surprise to anyone here that there is more to *do* in our culture now than ever before, but, also more than ever before, people report feeling *bored*... restless.

*“Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”<sup>8</sup>*

We have open time and, instead of filling it with prayer or worship of God Almighty... instead of filling it with time to genuinely connect with family or friends... instead of filling that open time with activities that enrich our spirits, we fill a disproportionate amount of it with mindless TV, movies, video games, sports, shopping, internet searches – you name it.

Or we need comfort for some reason and, instead of seeking that comfort first in prayer or Scripture or conversation with a trusted counselor, we seek that comfort by grabbing a bag of chips or a pint of ice cream... by cracking open a six-pack or winding the corkscrew into an unopened bottle... by hopping onto the website that brings us a shot of satisfaction.

We do these things and the comfort comes... but it never lasts. We fill our time with who knows what and our time gets filled... but we aren't growing spiritually and we aren't doing as much as we *could* be doing for God.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://thinkexist.com/quotation/thou-hast-made-us-for-thyself-o-lord-and-our/347709.html>

Food. Physical intimacy. Entertainment. In his book, *Gods at War*, these are the idols Kyle Idleman describes as the gods who live in “The Temple of Pleasure.” And most of us are quite familiar with one or more of these gods. We know the idol of food. We know the idol of physical intimacy. We know the idol of entertainment.

And, to be clear, none of these things are inherently bad. In fact, they are all good gifts from God! If food were meant only to be functional, God would not have given us taste buds! Most of us understand the gift that is a delicious meal.

If physical intimacy were meant only to be functional... it would be just that: functional. Yet God gives us the opportunity to find partners with whom we can delight – with whom we can experience the fullness of a trusting relationship that is joyful emotionally *and* physically.

And if our time were meant to be filled only with work or study, God would not have given us the gift of Sabbath time for rest and relaxation. In order to survive spiritually in this life, we *need* to be able to quiet our minds and slow down our bodies. We *need* fun, plain and simple!

Food. Physical intimacy. Entertainment. These are all good gifts from God *for which* we are to be thankful... but *of which* we are to be good stewards.

And our relationship with these good gifts wanders into idol worship when we attempt to make any of them fill the place in our hearts that is meant for God Almighty.

Food. Physical Intimacy. Entertainment. Each of these ceases to be a good gift from God when we look to them to fill the “empty” in our lives. They can *add to* our lives, but none of them can bring ultimate fulfillment... and they *certainly* cannot bring us salvation.

Unfortunately, the way many of us devour food, physical intimacy, and entertainment, it's clear that, too often, we think they *can*, in fact, bring ultimate fulfillment and salvation.

In fact, we can all too easily sacrifice relationships with our closest dear ones when we begin to worship any of these idols.

Friends can distance themselves from us when they sense we are obsessed with food, diets, or exercise. Distance – and sometimes unfixable harm – is created in marriage when one partner seeks physical intimacy from a source other than their spouse. Mindless entertainment can be a way of avoiding real connection with your dear ones.

When there is “empty” in our lives – when our hearts are restless – we are at risk of finding idols to fill the “empty.” If we find and worship those idols, our souls and our relationships will suffer... including our relationship with God Almighty.

Today's Gospel reading from John chapter 6 tells the story of Jesus' miraculous feeding of thousands of people with only five small loaves of bread and two fish.<sup>9</sup> The crowd that day was probably not unlike the crowd described in that imagined scenario I read a few minutes ago:

*the anxious, excited, Sunday-morning crowd that was eagerly anticipating the worship service... a crowd so resembling the pre-game crowd on a football Sunday in the fall.*

Like those crowds, the crowd in John 6 had perhaps shown up because they sought to be entertained. Perhaps because they were expecting their lives to be blessed with a shot of excitement. After all, many of them had heard through the grapevine that Jesus was a miracle-worker.

And they did, indeed, experience a miracle. Their stomachs had been empty, grumbling with hunger, and then Jesus fed all 5,000-plus with an amount of food that would have barely fed the average American family.

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<sup>9</sup> John 6: 1-15, 22-35



The miracle filled the crowd's "empty" ... but their full stomachs weren't good enough. (They never are, are they?) Many in the crowd were so "entertained" by Jesus' magical, miraculous power that they got up and tried to kidnap him to make him their king.

Many in the crowd wanted to capture the magic and keep it for themselves – so they could have more of it whenever they needed a hit.

But Jesus is *not* a magician. He doesn't perform miracles for our short-term benefit... and he certainly doesn't perform miracles to entertain the masses. No. Rather, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ performs miracles in order to point to God Almighty, the Holy One who created us, who loves us, who deserves our primary worship and allegiance... and the One who fills every true and holy need.

*"I am the bread that gives life,"* Jesus said to the hungry, empty crowd.  
*"No one who comes to me will ever be hungry. No one who has faith in me will ever be thirsty."*<sup>10</sup>

Those words of Jesus aren't about literal hunger or literal thirst. Our bodies *will* get hungry and thirsty. Of course, they will. But, our *souls* will be filled to overflowing if we look first to Jesus – Son of our loving, Creator God... the God who is *jealous* for us and who works overtime to draw our hearts heavenward. Let us pray...

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<sup>10</sup> John 6:35 New Living Translation (NLT)