

When I think about worshipping idols, the first images that comes to mind for me, are the ancient pagan rituals imagined by the choreographers and set designers of lavish epic movies from the golden age of Hollywood. But there are forms of idolatry that don't translate so readily to visual media. For our Lenten study this year, we read David Zahl's *Seculosity*, which describes the way people today turn all sorts of ordinary experiences and things into idols. Work and leisure, food and romance, parenting and politics, or simply how busy we are, human ingenuity can turn just about anything into an object of devotion and reassurance of our adequacy. None of the things Zahl talks about are inherently bad, and some are good. But none of them are God. None is worthy of being our highest calling, none gives us our inherent self-worth, none can save us from our sins.

The sheer variety of idolatries is staggering, when you think about it. Why would we put so many different things in the place of God? I suspect that the abundance of idols corresponds to the diversity of weaknesses in human nature. God can feel far away and mysterious, God's way can be hard, God's teachings are sometimes difficult, and God is notoriously hard to control. And then there's the pesky unity and exclusivity of God, in stark contrast to the world's long menu of choices. So the appeal of devoting ourselves to a simple object, which promises specific gratification in return, one that *you* chose after careful deliberation (or skimming the online reviews), the appeal is obvious... even if some of our forms of worship are subtle. We might wonder how the people who had literally been following Jesus could complain and turn away until we reflect on these things.

The menu of choices is long not only because our susceptibilities are many, but also because God is generous and creative. God created so many wonderful, beautiful, appealing, dangerous things. Scripture teaches that God created all things in the universe to be good, and created us to be *very* good, and further hallowed the created order and humanity itself by becoming part of it in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. But despite God's intentions, these things can just as easily be abused, they can be weaponized, and thrown at us like so many stones, and then we are surprised to learn, the hard way, that we are more vulnerable than we had been led to believe. Clearly, just because we can rightly say that a thing is good, and that God is good, does not make the thing equivalent to God. The same God who created all things remains supreme and sovereign, and even Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, the Human One, was in the beginning with God, and through him all things were made. One way of viewing the whole Judeo-Christian story is humanity's struggle to come to grips with these facts and their implications.

Again and again in the Hebrew Bible, we see the people of God, or a portion of them, losing the struggle, and falling away, and following their hearts or their less noble impulses and putting something else in the place of God. This does not make God stop loving them, as we see in today's reading from Joshua, but rather call them back in

love, by reminding them of what God has done for them, the concrete representation of the mysterious but objective reality of who God is. Because God exists above and beyond our world, God can do great things for us, and chooses to do so out of God's infinite love for us.

God saves us in many ways, but always for the same reason: love. That God is love, and that love is active, is good news, and like all news, it simply is, enduring and immutable truth independent from the eye of the beholder. This is why I love it when people ask me, "when were you saved," because the answer has nothing to do with my own feelings and understanding and everything to do with what happened on a cross just outside Jerusalem on a spring day two millennia ago. And it's not just happenstance that Jesus saved us at a time when no one understood what he was doing, a time when most of the few people who had heard of him had abandoned him and most of the rest were part of the effort to kill him.

The world still tries to resist him. As if all the idols I mentioned weren't enough, the latest, most insidious threat is its attempt to convince us that we can put *ourselves* in his place. Not his cross, but his throne. Now we are told that our own feelings don't just need respect or validation, but that every feeling we have deserves absolute, unquestioned deference, and any challenge to this is an attack on our very being. As appealing as it may sound to live in a world shaped to cater to our every whim, such a world places an intolerable burden upon its sole inhabitant, tasking that one with their own salvation, yet leaving them ill-equipped and undefended. This is not to say we or our feelings are unworthy of respect, but only that they are part of a greater reality; indeed, being a part of that reality makes them *more* worthy of respect.

Our feelings, values, preferences, and experiences absolutely are valid; they make us who we are, and therefore who God loves, and there can be no greater validation than God's love. We and these things within us, while they are good things, are the objects and products of God's love. As a part of creation, and especially as a part of us, they are worthy of respect, but they are not the Gospel, they are not substitutes for God's love, they are not equivalent to God's love. Only the Spirit gives life, which Jesus offers us in his words and his very being. Through them, God gives us grace, truth, and life. Attempting to put other things in the place of God's love yields pain, bitterness, and division, not only in ourselves, but in those around us.

Our personal experiences are all the more real because they take place in, and are enlightened by, the reality of God's love for us, and we may choose to respond to the reality we inhabit in many ways, but the most excellent is always by walking in love, as Christ loves us. We may even be so moved by our experience of the reality of God's love that we greet others with compassion rooted in that love.

So yes, the necessity and sovereignty of Jesus is a hard teaching, but the heart of the teaching, and the true burden, lie not in the one eating the bread, nor in the choice to eat, but in the bread itself, Jesus. The one upon whom we are invited to feast

can save us because he is also God with us, and because God has granted all of us the gift of life through him. The strength of God's power will protect us from all the things that distract or dislodge us from the love of God, and will save us by the relationship which is our birthright as the people of God.