

## “Which is your favorite god?”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 14, Proper 16, Lectionary 21

Texts: Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18; Ephesians 6:10–20; John 6:56–59

Preached: November 13, 2016 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Sisters and brothers, pray for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. AMEN

Which are your favorite gods? Oh, I have lots of them. If I had to pick a favorite, I’d probably say the god Money. Sometimes I call him Materialism or Greed, but it’s still the same god. I’ve found that Amazon is a wonderful way to worship him. It’s a very expensive religion, though, so when I can’t worship by spending, I have to worship by lusting after all the things I can’t buy. It’s something of a vicious cycle, but I manage to worship just about every single day. Though I have to admit, I’m also terribly fond of the worship of the god Fear. I usually depend on her to help me when I have decisions to make—or when I don’t want to make a decision. When I worship her, it’s almost as though I don’t have to think things through. I like that. Pride is another of my favorites. He makes me feel so good about myself, so special. The god Anger also demands a lot of my attention. I breathe a little prayer to him almost every time I read or hear the news these days. Oh, and there’s the god Internet. I find myself lost in contemplation of her for hours a day, sometimes, often to the point of paying no attention to my partner.

I have several ancestral gods, as well. While I don’t worship them as often, I do find myself bowing to them from time to time. Old habits die hard. The two chief gods in that pantheon are probably Racism and Supremacism. Several of my ancestors in the South were high priests in that religion...slaveowners for more than 150 years, as best I can make out in the genealogy, and when my great-grandfather died they found his Klan robes hidden in his closet. And while pretty much everyone in the family has now openly repudiated those gods, and I find them abhorrent, it’s amazing how the old ways can still intrude, like it or not. It’s almost as though they speak into your ear at the strangest times. A number of people in my family across the generations have also worshiped the god Addictions, and the god Anxiety has been a constant companion for many of us. My family has also had a very strong devotion to the god Grudgeholding. We sometimes compete with one another to see who can worship that god the most faithfully.

But enough about me. Which are your favorite gods? We all have them. Some of your favorites may be the same as mine. If you’re having trouble naming them, let me give you a definition that may help you identify them. Here’s what Martin Luther says in the *Large Catechism*, which is sort of like the pastor’s cheat sheet for the *Small Catechism*, in case confirmands ask you tough questions:

“You are to have no other gods.’ That is, you are to regard me alone as your God. What does this mean, and how is it to be understood? What does “to have a god” mean, or what is God?

*Answer:* A “god” is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.”

So here’s another way to put the question: What are the things on which your heart relies and depends? *[pause]* You may share many of the same gods I worship, but I’m sure you have your own. Sometimes other people can become our gods. Sometimes our leisure pursuits become our gods. The god Work demands a lot of worship, as well. Or maybe your god is a political ideology, or a particular party or political leader. I have a number of friends who also worship the god Firearms, though I’ve argued with some of them that that’s merely another manifestation of the god Fear whom I worship so regularly. Others worship Individualism. For many in today’s society, the most popular religion has become Americanism, also worshiped as Nationalism. It’s weird, the god Americanism frequently is worshiped in churches that look almost identical to Christian ones. The two religions sometimes are almost indistinguishable from one another. But that often happens with our gods, I find. It somehow makes their worship a little more respectable. And it’s very convenient just to be able to substitute a flag for a cross and still use the same language and prayers. I saw one church in Dallas that actually had a worship service with a huge American flag suspended across the front of the church and the choir sang a hymn of praise to their god, “Make America Great Again.” It’s interesting to me how stirring that worship is.

Even if we're not that blatant about our devotion, congregations can still manage to incorporate the worship of other gods. Sometimes we worship the god Building, which is easy to do, I think, because we tend to associate our encounters with the Living God with the places where those have taken place. We can worship the god Heritage, whose face is always turned backwards. We sometimes worship the god Inertia, who is one of the most comforting of gods, because nothing ever changes with her, and she demands nothing of us but to rest upon her.

You see, anything that our hearts, either individually or collectively, rely and depend upon, those things become our gods. But we have a God, the one true God, who stands on the other side calling for us to worship him and him alone. The scriptures today describe this situation as a struggle, even as spiritual warfare, between the God of Israel and Jesus and all those other gods who compete for our attention. And there is a choice that is demanded of each one of us, and of us as a community of God's people. Like a lover confronting a cheating partner, the demand is put to us: Decide this day which one of us you are going to give your heart to. Which of us will you serve?

Sisters and brothers, I don't think you have to believe literally in other deities to acknowledge that there are forces in this world that are working against the values of the kingdom of God, forces of division and anger and fear, forces of greed and selfishness, forces that seek superiority of one nation or class over others, forces that seek to isolate people from one another. And those forces, those "powers of the present darkness" call out to us to come and worship them, to give ourselves to them, to turn away from the power and presence of the true God we worship here today.

And at some point, we are forced to decide: Which god will we serve? To which god will we give our hearts and our devotion? Will we worship the God who has shaped and formed us, the God who calls us to leave behind our attachments and give ourselves to the work of building the peaceable kingdom, the God who commands us to love the widow and the orphan, the poor and the immigrant? Will we worship the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who has claimed us in baptism and calls us to be light for the dark world? Will we choose the God who demands our all, but who was at the same time willing to give his all for our sakes? Or will we choose instead the false gods who promise so much, but whose worship ultimately leads to naught that remains or matters?

Now, I grew up in a tradition where there were altar calls at the end of every service during which people were called to walk forward and "give their hearts to Jesus." As Lutherans, we shy away from that phrase, because it implies that we're the ones who control this call from God to come and worship and follow. And I believe very firmly that the call comes from God, not from us, and that it is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that works on us, drawing us to worship the Living God. That is a gift, and it doesn't come from us. But I also believe that we daily are called to make choices in this spiritual struggle that is going on around us, when the gods of this earth tug at us, trying to pull us away from giving our hearts fully to the God who made heaven and earth, the God revealed to us in broken bread and poured out wine. Every day, we are called to become more and more like our God, to become more and more like Jesus. Every day we are called to new conversion, to a new commitment to follow.

Like those first disciples, we find it hard, and it is tempting to just walk away from it, to go off and give ourselves to those other gods who don't demand as much from us, seemingly. Many, many people take that route, the line of least resistance. Jesus sat there and watched as people fell away because what he was asking of them carried too high a cost. Then he looked at the core group that remained around him and said, "Aren't you going to leave also?" I love Peter's response, which we often sing as part of greeting the gospel: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Where else could we go?

We will be tempted every single day to turn away from following Jesus, from worshiping the True God. That is our nature. And every single day, we are faced with the question "Choose this day whom you will serve." But with the Spirit's help, dwelling in us, we are empowered to choose to follow Jesus, are given strength to turn away from the idols that compete for our attention. And each week as we come to this table and eat the bread broken for us, and drink the wine poured out for us, we take into ourselves the power to struggle against the evil forces at work in this world. We are reminded of the promise that we are loved and forgiven. And then we are sent out into the fray to be bread for the world, committed once again to building the kingdom, and drawing others to worship the God whom we give our hearts. Will you choose this day, once more, to follow Jesus? May it be so. AMEN

