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The ABC's of Faith: I - Idolatry

1 Kings 19:9a-12 adapted from The Message Then the word of God came to him: "So Elijah, what are you doing here?" "I've been working my heart out for God" said Elijah. "The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed the places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me." Then he was told, "Go, stand on the mountain at attention before God. God will pass by." A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before God, but God wasn't to be found in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but God wasn't in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but God wasn't in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper.

Exodus 20:3-4 NRSV You shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

1 Corinthians 10:14-17 NRSV Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

It may seem like such a quaint word - idolatry. For those of a certain age, it may connote one of those swashbuckling scenes of the young Harrison Ford – before his knees got creaky – confidently confronting all those ugly idols in those utterly implausible scenes in “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” More recently, the television franchise “American Idol” has resurrected the word as folks tune in to see sublime or nails-on-chalkboard awful renditions of songs in a show that became in the last decade one of the most popular television shows of all time. We sometimes use the word to talk about someone we admire: “She’s my idol.” But as a religious term? As part of the

“vocabulary of faith” which we’ve been focusing on during this “ABC’s of Faith” sermon series? Well, it’s really not very much on our radar, is it? We read passages from St. Paul where he discusses whether it is permissible for Christians to eat meat that has first been consecrated to idols – the various Roman gods of the day – and we wonder what it has to do with us. We hear Paul saying, as in one of our scriptures for this morning, sternly telling us to flee from the worship of idols. We read that line from the Ten Commandments warning us not to make an idol, and we may give it lip service because of the company it keeps but we really don’t think we are tempted to gather up some random stuff and craft for ourselves an idol to worship and bow down to. We may read of Moses going up the Mount of Sinai to receive those Ten Commandments and while he is gone of how the people melted down their jewelry and created a Golden Calf and worshiped it and we may think to ourselves “how silly of them.” In short, the word idol and idolatry is something we use either as a particularly fine superlative – “She’s my idol!” – when we want to express admiration, or we think that those passages about idolatry in both Testaments just don’t really have anything to do with us in our day and age.

But we would be wrong. For while we may not be melting down gold on our stoves and making sculptures of farm animals, or whittling chunks of wood into images that we then worship, you and I nonetheless are prone to the sin of idolatry on every day of our lives. For you see, the point of the warnings in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures about idolatry are there to remind us that you and I are prone and always tempted to put our trust in things that do not deserve it. *To put our trust in something that does not deserve it.* And that is exactly when we fall prey to replacing God with

something of our own making, or something that the culture tells us is ultimate and trustworthy but which is not. This morning, then, let me name three idolatries that will tempt you and me to put our trust in them, and when we do our behaviors and words and actions will too often be less than they could have been, less than God wants them – and us – to be.

The first idolatry I would name is the idolatry of over-simple answers. Those answers may be dramatic, or eye-catching, or may fit on a bumper sticker; they may be spectacular or dramatic, but, as the prophet Elijah found when he was hiding out and expecting to find God in the dramatic and the spectacular, God is usually not to be found in such over-simple formulations, over-simple and purported answers to complex questions. Because, first of all, let's face it: Life is complex. Each of us in this room has or has experienced problems that defy a quick fix. Each of us here has faced situation where friends may have offered us simple cliches in response to our situation that simply did not work, were not helpful, were just not nuanced enough. Life takes time and effort, doesn't it, and there are no guarantees. And sometimes that can make us angry, even resentful. It can certainly dispirit us at times. And that's exactly when we find ourselves ready to listen to the person who would offer simplicity again. But simple answers, over-simple answers, as flashy and full of pizzazz and certainty as they appear to be sometimes, as appealing as they can even be sometimes, can hide the Gospel instead of reveal it. I don't recall whether I've quoted my mother to you on this topic, but something she once said has stayed with me all these years: "*I've learned,*" she

said once when she was faced with someone who purported to tell her some simple answer to some perplexing issue,” *that for every question there is always a very simple answer – that is very simply wrong.*” Or, as the story from Elijah might put it, “God was not there,” God is not to be found in the idolatry of the over-simple, and when we put our trust in such we and God will find ourselves disappointed.

The second idolatry I would name, the second place that you and I are sometimes to place our trust when that trust is not in fact warranted, is the idolatry of premature certainty. Sometimes you and I look for, even crave, certainty where there is no certainty to be had, or where there is no certainty to be had yet.. My friend and clergy colleague Bob Hill, with whom I did my annual combination road-trip and continuing education and spiritual retreat on wheels a couple of weeks ago, is one of three co-hosts for an early Sunday morning radio show in Kansas City where folks call in to discuss religion and get the perspectives of a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and a rabbi. My goodness, the stories he tells about some of those callers. He reports that there is no lack of folks who are absolutely sure that they know for absolutely certain what the answers to some of the most complex questions of church and state and faith are. Their certain is absolute and usually their voices, Bob says, are loud and very, very sure of themselves. But, again, in the Bible, throughout both Testaments, the word for such misplaced certainty is indeed idolatry: investing

somebody or something with a power over your life that they have no right to have. And much much too often in Christian history we have seen such premature certainty lead to fanaticism, lead to a belittling and even persecution of those with whom one disagrees. It is the utter opposite of the kind of humility that Jesus himself called for in His Sermon on the Mount. The craving for certainty is understandable; you and sometimes get tired of life's ambiguities. Someone once said that the mark of being a grownup is the ability to live with ambiguity. But there are times we don't want to be grownup, there are times we are tired of not knowing. And those are precisely the most dangerous times for our faith, for indeed we may well fall of the loudest and most strident voice proclaiming certainty where this no certainty to be had. But we must ever be on our guard against it, because it is indeed an idolatry and such misplaced and premature certainty in the face of things that are uncertain will not lead to what God wants for us.

The final idolatry I would name – that has been a temptation since the dawn of human history – is the Idolatry of Exclusivity. What do I mean? Well, particularly in times when we are worried or scared or fearful about our futures, the Idolatry of Exclusivity can try to seduce us into theological formations and beliefs about our fellow human beings that say that there is an “us” and there is a “them,” and that it is us who is absolutely right. Such a perspective rails against whoever the “enemy” is supposed to be – the “other,” those who are different,

those who don't share our political views, the immigrant. In fact, the psychologist Sigmund Freud once ruefully remarked that as far as he could see, the church wouldn't exist if it didn't have somebody to define as its enemy. And of course the problem with this is that it's not just other people that do this; we do it too. Because – let's admit it – it is attractive. There is something that is, at least superficially, satisfying about writing certain people off. Because you and I have discovered indeed that there are folks we don't like and who don't seem to like us, folks who annoy us, folks who we think continually get it wrong, folks who even manage to make us mad in just about everything they say. Do you have some of those folks in your life? I would confess that I do, and it is a constant temptation to write them off, make them into completely awful people so that I feel justified in mentally consigning them to the ranks of the "bad" people. But such attitudes deny the very being of God. Such attitudes are, really, to use the old word, blasphemy, because they say something very untrue about God. Because if God is boundless, unconditional love, then God loves those people whom I want to write off. God may not like what those people do – just as I am sure there are times that God doesn't like what I do – but to say that God doesn't really care for some people as much as for other people is to make God too small. It is to give lie to the nature of God and what God calls us to be so beautifully expressed in Edwin Markham's poem when he said: *"He drew a circle that shut me out- Heretic , rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a*

circle and took him in.”

All of these idolatries do vie for our attention – and, truth be told, they can even be, at least for a moment, satisfying. But they are not satisfying for long for they are empty calories in the face of our hunger for God. The Golden Calf that the Hebrew people created out of their anxiety could not save them, guide them, love them. It is the same with us. Over-simple approaches to life and church and God, approaches where there is a misplaced certainty, approaches that exclude and write certain folks off flourish because they play to our fears and our anxieties and the worst in us, not the best. They are understandable, indeed, when life is hard and complex and scary and troubling, but they finally will not satisfy, they finally fail. But they can leave much hurt in their wake. They are not, indeed, the places to put our trust.

Where are those places? Well, return with me to the story of Elijah – one who himself was at that moment of his life in a world of hurt, facing a fearful future. But notice where God is to be found in that story. In Elijah’s telling, God is to be found in quiet words. God is to be found in humble approaches to truth. God is to be found in an attitude of humility. My friends as we in this congregation continue to seek to manifest radical hospitality to those who don’t know the love of God, as we seek to deepen our faith and our spirituality, let us make sure that we avoid and flirtation with these three idolatries I have named. May we avoid the temptations of being over-simple, of misplaced certainties, of drawing lines that

too quickly hurt or exclude. For we have a wonderful opportunity as individuals and as a congregation: to continue to seek to heal hurt and to show the gospel of a God who is grace unbounded and love unconditional Too many people are hungry for such a God, who do not know what we know. Let us put our trust in the fact that God will continue to use us, to use our humility, to use our conviction that God's grace is for all. Through the power of Jesus Christ, may it be so, may it be so.