

"MISDIRECTED WORSHIP"

8.10.03 sermon in
South Congregational Church
Centerville MA 02632

The Lections: By lector: Eph.4.25-5.2; Jn.6.35,41-51. By preacher: 1K.18.36-40; Ro.1.16-25

Everybody worships. Human beings differ not only in how they worship, but what. And the quality of what we worship determines the quality of our life: we become like what we love. And because we are free to choose what we worship, we are responsible for our choice.

That was the sermon.

No, that was only the bones of the sermon. You can help me put meat on the bones, bone by bone. Of course the sermon can't walk out of here, & make a difference in our lives & world unless meat comes on the bones--as meat came on the bones when Ezekiel did what God told him to (Eze.1.4): "Tell these dry bones to listen to the word of the Lord." So let's consider the bones:

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Bone #1: "Everybody worships." There may be "separation of church and state," though public thinkers flesh out the bones of this Jefferson phrase a half dozen ways; but there's no separation of human beings from worship.

A recent letter-to-the-editor of mine ended thus: "The essay [I was critiquing] ends disingenuously: 'No religious issue but a human one [said the author, trying to cancel the religion factor from a public issue].' The distinction can be made in the mind only, not in life. Everything human is religious in that the taboo of the sacred is always and everywhere in operation."

Let's test this proposition by thinking about Tom Paine, the least religious early American. Hear him in a 1797 letter: "We talk of religion. Let us talk of truth; for that which is not truth, is not worthy of the name of religion...as to bells, they are a public nuisance." His father was a Quaker whose son replaced "God" (guarded by the taboo against blasphemy) with "Truth" (guarded by the taboo against falsehood/hypocrisy/oppression [including, as the letter says, the oppression of Christian-bells when honorable deists were trying to sleep]). Bells? Sounds trivial. But the U.S. will face a crisis when the first mosque demands the right of the muezzin-call, polluting the public space with pagan sound in a land Christian in origin (all the Founding Fathers) & practice (only ca.6% of Americans declaring themselves to be other than Christian).

Istanbul's Hagia Sophia was an ancient church stolen by Muslims, & I was offended--when Loree & I were having lunch across the street from it, two years ago--to hear the Muslim call to prayer from one of its minarets.

Everybody worships, though some so narrowly--& wrongly--define "worship" as to exclude themselves (as "spiritual" instead of "religious," or even as "antireligious").

Bone #2: "Human beings differ in how they worship." Worship diversity is as wide as, & parallel to, cultural diversity. Besides generally recognizable ways of worship are arcane ways & ways not so named (e.g., Tom Paine's worship of truth took the form of pamphleteering & letter-writing). Alien imports are especially visible, as was the particular form of Baalism Jezebel brought with her into Samaria when she married Ahab: this misdirected worship we read of in our third lection this morning.

Bone #3: "Human beings differ in what (or whom) they worship." Faithful to her parental family's religion of freethinking, Katharine Hepburn's object of worship was her commitment-free, marriage-free (no, she didn't want to marry Spencer Tracy), past-free ("always lived in the moment....no looking back") mind (A.Scott Berg, KATE REMEMBERED [Putnam/03]). No afterlife, of course: "When you're dead your dead." Her ashes? Disposed of in Hartford CN (her provenance) without ceremony. Freedom worship is an American religion that takes many forms: constraints are demonic, & liberation (to "do your thing" & "follow your bliss") is salvation. In our first reading this morning we found a radically different object of worship than this liberated self, namely, the God who "sets you free" from the infantile self that judges everything & everybody in terms of its own needs/wants/feelings--the self that is its own deity, its own altar. "Try to be like God," this scripture says, "be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us and gave his life for us as a sweet-smelling offering and sacrifice that pleases God."

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In this same spirit of self-giving rather than self-taking, consider this morning's second reading. Here three times Jesus says not "I am the mouth" (consuming whatever I please) but "I am the bread" (food for others, "living bread" nourishing the believer for "eternal life"). Here the liberation we Christians rejoice in is the freedom not to get but to give, & our Lord's Cross provides this double freedom. Paul puts it concisely: "Because of his cross, the world is dead as far as I am concerned, and I am dead as far as the world is concerned" (Gal.6.14 CEV; J.Zink's German paraphrase spells it out: "I am free from the world's powers, laws, and influence"; I "am dead to the world's 'Ansprüchen'" [claims, demands, pretensions]).

Matching this double freedom is double joy, here & hereafter. Why is "Amazing Grace" so popular in & out of church? Because it's full of the Christian experience of $\chi\alpha\rho\iota\varsigma$ *charis*, the NT word meaning both gift (with its joy in receiving) & gratitude (with its joy in giving thanks [both "grace" & "gratitude" being transliterations of this key word in the Christian language]). This "grace" gets preached also in unexpected pulpits such as the 1936 B'way play "You Can't Take It With You," which ends with these words ending Grampa's "grace" at table: "We thank you."

Paul Minear, a great NT scholar, makes this shocking statement of the importance of gratitude (THE BIBLE AND THE HISTORIAN [Abingdon/02] 234): "In and through thankfulness the self is born. In gratitude, the self's God-relationship gives birth to a self-awareness and a neighbor-awareness that together constitute the self....[243] All things come from God and are intended to move toward God. It is because we are indebted to God for all things that we should give thanks at all times and for everything....The ground of Christian gratitude is that 'we are the Lord's.'"

Bone #4: "The quality of what we worship determines the quality of our life: we become like what we love." All worship not directed to the God who made & calls & remakes us is misdirected worship--in the words of this morning's fourth reading, "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Ro.1.25; two verses earlier, the creatures are visible idols, which we make). These are the Bible words I hope you remember from this sermon: all our lives we're tempted to "worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator." Sometime soon, please sit down & in quiet list--from your personal history, & in your heart now--your own temptations to misdirect worship from the Creator to some creature, including yourself. Nobody can make that list for you. But I can promise you that in making it, you will--as did the Prodigal Son--"come to yourself," sense "signals of transcendence" (Peter Berger), & "return to the Father." On the phone today I tried to explain "grace" (as in "Amazing Grace") to a nonChristian. One thing I said was this: "Grace is the forgiveness-gift we are ready to receive when we give up the idea that we don't need gifts," don't need the Giver, don't need God.

It would take a book--& there are such books--to detail what happens to people & societies worshiping other than God, which is always less than God. Says the Psalmist (106.15 NRSV), God "gave them what they what they asked, but sent a wasting disease among them [KJV: "leanness into their soul"]." Augustine says that "yearning [Ger., "Sehnsucht"]" for God "makes the heart deep": the corollary is that yearning for less than God (i.e., creature-worship) makes the heart shallow & the self & life thin. I have time for only one example: The church says "Lift up your hearts" & the shopping mall says "Open your purse & your mouth." In Bible light, the mall is the Prodigal Son's pig-trough: the feast is back at the Father's house, ready when we redirect our worship to the God of grace & glory. Further, the mall is doomed: (1) The earth cannot sustain our American level of "development," that is, affluence; & (2) Our affluence is self-defeating: jobs (both blue- & white-color) & capital are being increasingly sucked out of America, & our economy will decline relative to the increasing weight of permanently unemployed.

Bone #5: "And because we are free to choose what we worship, we are responsible for our choice." Satan offered Jesus' opportunities to misdirect his worship (M.1.12-13; Mt.4.1-11; L.4.1-13); but the dark forces failed to deter our Lord from the way of the Cross, the way the world calls weakness & the resurrection exhibits as strength.

That choice was his. What has been ours? What now is ours?