
Sermon
Idol Worship

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
July 5, 2009

First Reading: Exodus 32:7-10

⁷The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"' ⁹The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.'

Second Reading: Ivorie Anthony. Prayer Needed for Global Economies. The 700 Club (http://www.cbn.com/700club/guests/bios/cindy_jacobs102008.aspx).

In early August in her prayer time Cindy [Jacobs] heard the Lord say, "There will be no more business as usual."

Little did she know the scope of what this meant on a worldwide scale. God is on the move. She and many others have taken this as a major point of intercession. She believes that just as there came a time when God judged the gods of Egypt, He is now judging the god of mammon. Nations are standing on the cusp of history that will determine their course for generations to come. God is judging the ideologies of nations. He is moving to put the fear of the Lord not only on His church; but upon the nations of the world.

For these and other reasons Cindy is calling for a Day of Prayer for the World's Economies on Wednesday, October 29, 2008. They are calling for prayer for the stock markets, banks, and financial institutions of the world on the date the stock market crashed in 1929. They are meeting at the New York Stock Exchange, the Federal Reserve Bank, and its 12 principal branches around the US that day.

"We are going to intercede at the site of the statue of the bull on Wall Street to ask God to begin a shift from the bull and bear markets to what we feel will be the 'Lion's Market,' or God's control over the economic systems," she said. "While we do not have the full revelation of all this will entail, we do know that without intercession, economies will crumble."

Cindy is encouraging prayer groups to intercede for banks and financial institutions in your area. Cindy says each of us has to be accountable to the Lord.

"Don't think you're going to be in sin and that God will take care of you in these hard economic times. Holiness is key," Cindy said. Each of us has a part to play and should not think that God will indiscriminately bless us without us dealing with personal areas

that are wrong. We must repent of any misuse of money, think before we spend, get out of debt, etc., and allow God to do a course correction for us.

Sermon

The last few days have been full of news about idols. I speak, of course, about Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson. Both are people who have been idols for millions. Idols, of course, are traditionally represented with graven images. I believe the 1976 pinup poster of Ms. Fawcett more than qualifies as a graven image. It sold twelve million copies, more than any other pinup poster in history. Mr. Jackson's image has been everywhere through photographs and videos, his fame and popularity outgrowing the limitations of the traditional concept of the graven image – not surprising for one who could legitimately claim to be the 'King of Pop.' The pandemonium over the death of Mr. Jackson is astonishing. At first I thought it would be limited to the shores of America, but I was wrong. It has become a worldwide phenomena. Even the political commentary shows were, for a few days at least, spending a substantial part of their time talking about Michael Jackson. A week after his death I awoke, turned on the television and discovered one of the morning talk shows was devoting itself almost entirely to the story of Michael Jackson and his Valhalla, the Neverland Valley Ranch. The obsessed focus on Michael Jackson continued almost without interruption until Friday when Sarah Palin – a political idol if ever there was one – made the surprise announcement that she was resigning. Only an idol could displace another idol. World events didn't have a chance in the news cycle.

There's something you should know about idols. They all have feet of clay. Farrah Fawcett was a talented actress deserving of the awards she received, but her fame was centered on her body – a body that probably made her career possible, but then stunted it. Michael Jackson was, I think, a genius of music and dance. Fred Astaire said of him, "That's the greatest dancer of the century," and Frank Sinatra said, "The only male singer who I've seen besides myself and who's better than me – that is Michael Jackson." He was also a tormented soul. The multiple plastic surgeries that changed his appearance can, I think, be best understood as multiple episodes of self-mutilation. His trial for child molestation may have ended in a not guilty verdict, but there seems little doubt that he was himself abused and as an adult routinely engaged in inappropriate behavior with young children in what I believe was a desperate effort to have the childhood he never had, a desperate demonstration of a dysfunctional life, a desperate demonstration of the fact that being an idol is not all it's cracked up to be. If ever there was a cry for help it was his creation and naming of the Neverland Valley Ranch – a poignant reminder that the character of Peter Pan is, in truth, a tragic character.

And those two are not the only idols recently in the news. There is also the story of Susan Boyle, the singing sensation from Great Britain. I am sure almost all of you have seen the video of her first performance on *Britain's Got Talent*. It began with people sneering at her appearance and ended with the thunderous applause that was nothing less than idol worship. Ms. Boyle quickly found the role of a popular idol to be a difficult one. She suffered a nervous breakdown and barely survived to the end of the competition, finishing – to the surprise of many – in second place. And therein lies

something of the problem with idol worship, especially when applied to people. It seems to drain the life out them. People don't want the real life person. They don't want the woman who wants to be taken seriously as an actress – and has the talent to justify it – who is also a mother with a son struggling with drug addiction. They don't want the gifted son abused and exploited by his father and escaping the pain of life with a regimen of opiate self-medication that is said to have run up pharmacy bills of over one hundred thousand dollars a year. They don't want to have to deal with the enormous pain and discomfort of the painfully shy and reclusive woman who has the voice of angel, but struggles to break free from the depression and melancholy of her life only to be burned by the fire of fame and adulation that greeted her.

People, of course, are not the only objects of idol worship. There are things and ideas that we worship. On this fourth of July weekend I think it's good to remember that people sometimes make an idol out of America, leading people to mistake a blind nationalism with patriotism, to believe that patriotism means 'our country right or wrong' when in fact what it properly means is, "Our country right or wrong – when right to be kept right; when wrong to be put right." (Senator Schurz had a marvelous gift for the right words!) I believe we have made an idol out of capitalism and an idol out of the idea of the market. We are told to bow down before it and worship perfection. The market knows all, sees all and invariably gives the perfect answer, the best possible result. Any other system is so deficient that we must call it evil. The problem is that the idol we have created, the idol of a perfect system, carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. That seed is humanity. The market is a collective function of human beings. Some are honest and sincere. Others are dishonest and see the market and capitalism as the opportunity to lie, cheat and steal – which is why the market as an idol of economic perfection is a false idol, a golden idol that no longer takes the form of a golden calf, but of a bronze bull on Wall Street that people are eager to worship.

When it comes to religion we do much the same. And the idols we worship, the graven images of the twenty-first century, take a variety of forms. Christianity makes an idol out of Jesus and Catholicism an idol of countless Saints. Creedal churches make idols out of their creeds. Many Christians – especially Protestants – make an idol out of the bible and many Muslims an idol from the Quran. Many Unitarian Universalists have made an idol out of the Principles and Purposes of our national association. Sometimes people make idols out of their beliefs, others make idols out of what they don't believe. In the process our idols become drained of their life because to be an idol is to be without nuance and contradiction and complexity. We are told – whatever the idol may be – that it has no contradictions, no complications, no reason to doubt. All our problems will be solved by using the Principles and Purposes as a proof text, by doing what the bible says, by asking what Jesus would do or by having a poster of Farrah Fawcett pinned on the wall. (The last, of course, may be limited to thirteen year old boys, but the idea is the same.)

False idols are always false solutions, be they cultural, religious or political. That's not to say there isn't good behind and within idols. The problem is that the best is not to be found in the sanitized versions that meet the requirements of mass marketing. The Jesus who became angry and overturned the tables, who consorted and partied with the wrong kind of people, the Jesus who made mistakes and learned from them is much

more interesting to me than the sanitized version sold in Sunday Schools. The Mother Theresa who had a crisis of faith and confided that she could not believe what she was supposed to believe, but who continued to do everything she could to help the poor and the destitute in Calcutta is more interesting and inspiring to me than the make believe plastic Saint that the Catholic church wants to turn her into. And the Farrah Fawcett who shared her struggle with cancer with the world and who agonized over her son's drug addiction has far more to teach than the pin-up poster idol.

But we prefer idols. We want our leaders and performance idols and our ideas to be perfect. We don't want to be bothered with imperfections and mistakes. We don't want to see them sweat. And that's a tragedy. It's a tragedy because while perfection is desirable we lose the benefit that comes from understanding that perfection doesn't come easy. In fact, it doesn't come at all. It's always hard work. The public persona of our idols is just the tip of the iceberg be it the music videos of a Michael Jackson representing thousands of man hours of effort or the religious lessons of the Buddha or a Jesus or a Mohammed representing an entire life of struggle. And most importantly, representing the lessons learned from mistakes.

We don't learn without first making mistakes. To worship idols that we see as perfect is just another way of avoiding our mistakes – with the result that we lose the opportunity to learn from them. That is why I believe any religion that declares it has all the answers, that claims it is the final revelation, that it has the perfect solution to the problems of life is necessarily an idolatrous religion, necessarily a false religion. It is why I am equally uncomfortable with television evangelists who proclaim, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" and the practice since 1984 in my own religious tradition that has prohibited the publication of any religious education materials that are not based on the UUA's Principles and Purposes.

One day someone will come along who will be a better singer and dancer than Michael Jackson. One day there will be someone to replace Farrah Fawcett. One day there will be a new and better statement of religion, a better explanation for the meaning and purpose of life. That which is worshipped today will be thrown away tomorrow. That doesn't mean we should not take our Principles and Purposes or the world's great religions seriously. On the contrary, I believe that to take them seriously we must not make idols out of them, we must take them in their entirety, recognizing their shortcomings and problems and mistakes that we might learn from them. In other words, I prefer a religion that knows it doesn't have all the answers and that knows it may be wrong about some things. That's a religion that takes as one of its principles a degree of humility.

It's not the most comfortable kind of religion. It declines to be anyone's idol. It insists that it is incomplete and unfinished and that there are lessons yet to be learned. But it is a religion of freedom, a religion that says we should honor the past but trust the future more. It is a religion that refuses to allow itself to be made an idol. It is a religion that insists that people have not only the right, but the obligation to challenge and question what it teaches. It is a religion that says doubt is not heresy, but the sign of an open and honest mind. And on this fourth of July weekend I would add that I also don't want a country that demands that its flag be treated as an idol to be worshipped like a golden calf or a bronze bull on Wall Street. Just as I want a religion of the open mind and the

open heart I want a country whose flag reminds us not of slavish obedience to any particular political ideology, but a flag that reminds us that this is a country where those who disagree with the government are just as patriotic as those who support its policies. In other words, I reject idolatry in both church and state. I want a religion and a state that reject any form of idolatry and call instead for freedom.

Amen.