

“Regaining Consciousness”
Texts: Exodus 20:1-17; Luke 18:18-30
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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. Exodus 20:4

Commencement speeches are ordinarily less than memorable. I tried to remember something from the many commencement addresses I have heard over the years, and I could not come up with a single thing. Then, I tried to remember something from the commencement addresses I have personally delivered, and I couldn't remember a thing. That's pitiful but true. Most who are involved in the production of graduations these days operate on the premise that the less said, the better. Consciously or not, they are probably taking their lead from Winston Churchill, who is said to have delivered the shortest college commencement address in history. Following a particularly long-winded oratory by a school official, Churchill's speech in its entirety consisted of the following 10 words - you can say it with me: "Never give up. Never give up. Never ever give up." Now that's a memorable speech.

I'm sure there have been others, but the only other memorable commencement address I'm familiar with was given four years ago on May 21, 2005, at Kenyon College in Ohio. The speaker was a writer named David Foster Wallace. I am sure that after he delivered the speech, the graduates rushed out of the auditorium and went on with their graduation festivities, but the speech had been recorded, and soon, it was being rapidly sent all around the Internet. This year, Wallace's speech was published in book form under the title *This Is Water*.

Wallace begins by telling the title story: "There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning boys; how's the water?' The two young fish swim on for a bit and then eventually one looks over at the other and goes, 'What the [heck] is water?'" Immediately after telling the story, Wallace says that "didactic little parable-ish stories" are standard fare in commencement addresses, but then he proceeds to deliver a commencement speech unlike any other I have ever read or heard. His subject is "awareness, plain and simple, awareness of what is real and essential, what is hidden in plain sight all around us, which we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: 'This is water. This is water.'" (1)

Why is it so hard to keep that which is real and true and life-giving front and center in our lives? Psychologists might suggest that various kinds of neuroses are the culprit. You and I might offer as our rationale that we know intellectually

what's important, but we're really busy. We have a lot on our plates. Golly, we have a lot on our plates, and there is just no time to keep the most important things in life in their most important places. We are nibbled to death by ducks, so to speak, and who can pay attention to the main thing? "What the heck is water?"

The problem has obviously been around for a while, this matter of keeping first things first; otherwise the Ten Commandments would not begin with the first commandment. The first commandment demands total loyalty from Israel toward YAHWEH, the Lord. *You shall have no other gods before me.* Note that the wording of the first commandment presupposes the existence of other gods. Plenty of people, including the Hebrew people, worshipped other gods, but the Hebrew people had a particular calling to worship God alone. They were not to follow after other people's gods or to make up new ones themselves. Back in the day, the gods people made up were called idols.

When I served on the National Church Committee that wrote the *Brief Statement of Faith* in the 1980s, the first thing the Chair of our committee asked the committee members to do was to prepare a paper on what we considered to be the biggest challenge to or the biggest crisis in the Christian Church today. Amazingly, all of us wrote papers that could have appropriately been entitled "Idolatry". We named the modern tendency to idol-making as our *status confessionis* as the Reformers used to say, meaning the crisis that faith must address in a particular time and place. We all sensed a strong tendency abroad to make just about anything else except God, Lord of our lives and the object of our greatest loyalties.

What are the names of some of those gods? They're so obvious, I feel silly even saying them. Few of us would admit to idol-making. We all tell ourselves, "No, no, not me!" Here are some that perhaps those **other** people out there have been bowing down before. Status is one - status in society, status in whatever group or profession we are in. We want to be noticed; it is very important to us to be noticed, to be respected. Our pride demands that we have respect. For others, wealth is their idol, though wealth seems like an idle dream for most people these days. Some people seek power of one kind or another over anything else. And look. Even if a person doesn't possess a lot of money, say, that doesn't mean that a person isn't driven by the desire for it.

For some who already have these things - a lot of money, a lot of power, a lot wealth - the problem becomes never having enough. Never can you have enough. Did you read or hear about Mr. Anthony Marshall, 85 years old? You would think he might have gotten a hold of his greed sometime before now. He is the son of the late Brooke Astor, one of America's wealthiest women. He was convicted on Thursday of defrauding his mother while she was alive and stealing tens of millions of dollars from her as she suffered from Alzheimer's disease in the last years of her life. Call it fraud; call it theft -- but behind the fraud and theft is idolatry. Clearly, money mattered more to Mr. Marshall than family, than

preservation of his own character, and certainly more than whatever the Lord required of him.

It's hard to say anything good about the recession. You can't dress it up in silk and satin, but at least one good thing might come out of it. I would guess that there's not a person in the sanctuary today who has not been affected negatively in some way by the recession. The one blessing, if you can call it that, that might emerge is that we learn that while "gathering and spending" are important parts of life, they should never be the purpose of our lives. Perhaps we will be set free from the idolatry of materialism that is so much a part of the atmosphere in modern society; it seems like the water that we swim in.

Idolatry shows its face in every age. What is it? Here is a simple definition: Idolatry is having something else in your life or even someone else in your life that is more important to you than God.

You might want to argue with me about whether idolatry is such a big problem. Atheism has gotten strong press in the last year or so, thanks to Sam Harris and his book *The End of Faith* and others. There are a vocal few who love to skewer religion, and sometimes religion deserves to be skewered, such as when it becomes anti-intellectual, as if God who gave us brains didn't want us to use them in thinking theologically. Religion, particularly the Christian religion, deserves to be skewered if Jesus and the grace and truth he brought and taught are not honored but are twisted and distorted.

That said, I am not worried about atheism. Few people are willing to raise their hand and say, "Hey, I'm an atheist. I don't believe in anything." I love this little story I came across recently. A journalist named Spencer Case was working in Iraq. Case is a self-described atheist, but there were two occasions when he was in Iraq when he felt the impulse to pray. "One was when his camp was under attack by enemy mortars, and the other was when he slept under the stars in a desolate part of western Iraq, and was struck by the contrast between the human-made chaos in that country and the beauty and order of the cosmos." Case said those experiences prompted him to pray this prayer: "Dear God, I have come to the conclusion you probably don't exist, but I have also come to the conclusion that I might be mistaken, however unlikely the odds may seem. If you are there, if I'm wrong, you know where to find me. Amen." (2)

David Foster Wallace, as far as I can tell, was not a religious person, but he really hit the mark when he said, "In the day-to-day trenches of life, there really is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshiping. Unless what you worship is grounded in the spiritual realm . . . , pretty much everything else you worship is going to eat you alive. If you worship money and things, you will never have enough. Worship your own beauty, your own body, your own sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly, and the older you get the uglier you will feel." The insidious thing is that these things have become our default. We gradually

slip into them without even being aware of it, like two fish asking, “What the heck is water?”

I think something of this nature was behind the question the young ruler, possessed of great wealth, asked of Jesus long ago. Jesus had just finished blessing the little children. You know the beautiful passage, *Let the little children come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of God*. Then, here comes the rich ruler, with his hands all full of everything. The children have nothing to show for themselves. The rich young ruler has it all; he is loaded up. He’s full of everything – status, wealth, power, cultural privilege. His hands are so full, he cannot receive the unconditional love and embrace of Jesus.

We sophisticated Presbyterians rarely sing that old revival song, *Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me. Oh Lamb of God, I come, I come.*” There is great gospel truth in those words. In the end, we will come before God, just as we are. God is not interested in our status, our power, our diplomas, our certificates, the number of clients we have. We come just as we are. This is the greatest human thing - to acknowledge with gladness that we belong to God *as we are*. The *Brief Statement* begins – *In life and in death we belong to God*, an echo of words from our ancient Catechism from the 16th century: *What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself, but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.*

It could be that the rich young ruler was done for, but I don't know. Maybe he went home and thought about it. Maybe he realized that Jesus had given him the key to his self-made prison. Maybe he started the first food bank in Galilee, or built the first elementary school or hospital in Palestine. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to get it. But that is our life work: To wake up and be real, and to understand what matters.

I'm sure it's a sacrilege to mention the Bee Gees in the same sentence as Jesus, but isn't our real human work, “Stayin’ alive”? That's our job. How do we do it? We make a clean sweep of our hearts and souls and get rid of the idols that we find there. Maybe not all at once, but at least one after the other until we get our lives aligned with God, aligned with God as our center and our neighbor as at least as important to us as we are to our own selves.

I know I talk a lot about helping our neighbor. God tells us to do it; it is our duty and our command and our privilege. The other thing we have a duty to do is not to miss our lives, to wake up to the wonders of regular old human existence - the sight of a cat sleeping in the sunshine on the window sill, the crispness in the October air, the praying of the Lord's Prayer with words that have been used for thousands of years by people of faith and joining our voices with theirs, praying the prayer Jesus taught us in the first place. God, what a privilege! This world needs people who are awake to its needs and to its joys and wonders.

David Foster Wallace made a terrible mistake. I must tell you now. Last October, he took his own life, defeated by a long battle with clinical depression. In honor of his memory, let us resolve not to miss our own lives by worshiping the wrong things. Let us wake up and look for signs of the Kingdom hidden in plain sight all around us.

I close with a story Elam Davies told in his final sermon at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago 25 years ago. Elam Davies was one of the great orators of the 20th century. He was Welch, and he was a “true bard of the pulpit”. (3) Dr. Davies ended his ministry with this reminiscence from his native Wales. It was evening, a glowing sunset. Dr. and Mrs. Davies had driven to the top of a local Welch landmark to catch the spectacular display of the sun setting. Just as God's kaleidoscope was spreading across the sky, an old jalopy-looking car pulled up alongside the Davies. “An elderly couple got out. They moved to the rear door of the car, where lay their son, a son clearly of their later years, a child though full-grown yet physically so incapacitated he could not sit up on the seat. The two of them contrived with great effort to slide his legs around and hold the door open so he could face out and see the sunset. And just as the sun and all of its magnificence was about to give its final burst of glory, the father lifted his son's chin and held it up, so that he too could see the sunset.” Then, the parents seamlessly shifted hands, and the mother held his chin up too. You can see the magnificence of the sunset only once a day, but all around, you can see love and grace and compassion. (4) They come from God. We've been swimming in them all along.

(1) David Foster Wallace, *This is Water*, Little, Brown and Company, 2009.

(2) *Humanist*, September/October.

(3) Poet and preacher J. Barrie Shepherd retells this story beautifully in his book, *Aspects of Love*, Upper Room Books, 1995, p.123.

(4) *Ibid.*