

One of the most visceral experiences of my life occurred when I was twenty-one years old. I graduated from college and before I began Seminary with summer Greek school, which I am pretty sure is theological boot camp, I went with a group from my university to do mission work in Russia. I wish that I could tell you that my motives for doing so were a hundred percent pure, but I had concentrated on Russian history in my undergraduate major and it simply offered me an opportunity to see a place that I had read about, studied, seen on television and wondered about.

If you are of a certain age, you can remember when Russia was still called the evil empire. Sure, the proper name was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic when I was growing up, but fairly or unfairly, we generally thought of it as Russia. So for somewhat impure motives, I signed up to go with the group to do mission work. I really just wanted to see some of the world.

I should probably also mention that I had lived a rather sheltered life up to this point. While my family was by no means rich, we were certainly comfortable. There was no question I could go to college and graduate school. I didn't have to pinch pennies to buy clothes or necessities. I was neither a starving artist nor a starving student. Deprivation wasn't in my arsenal of life experiences.

So, immediately after graduation, I stepped on a plane in Charlotte and about twenty-three hours later stepped off of an aging Aeroflot jet on to pock-marked tarmac in Moscow. There were soldiers standing around with machine guns casually slung over their shoulders. We were hustled through an empty airport to customs where we presented our visas and were marshaled to an equally empty baggage claim where we

took our baggage and loaded it onto a soviet era school bus that would cart us out into the countryside to a little town called Istra where we would spend most of the next month.

To explain the experience a bit more, I should mention that I'm thirty-six now, so by simple math you can figure out exactly when I was in Russia. It was right after the fall of communism in that country. The government had failed and was bankrupt. In the cities there was evidence everywhere of the chaos that followed the collapse of the government. Our translator, only a year or two older than we were, had been in the army that had besieged the parliament. Once grand buildings showed signs of disrepair. There were shanty-towns around the highway. And every once in a while one would see, far off on the horizon, the silhouette of a new mansion being built. "Mafia," our translator told us. We arrived at the school. It was a government school for children with varying degrees of hearing loss. What I should probably also add was that in the waning years of communism and after its collapse, it was not uncommon for parents who had no resources to care for their children to relinquish them to the state. So it was not only a school, it was an orphanage. The children who were there when we arrived were those who had no homes to return to during the summer break. The paint in the room where we would sleep hung from the walls in shreds – I'm sure it was lead-based. I've heard about the rats in Haiti from our members there, but I'm pretty sure I can swap rat-story for rat-story.

As a person who lives with moderately severe hearing loss myself, there was a double edged irony to my presence there. I benefited from a piece of technology for which I carried spare batteries that might have transformed the lives of many of the young people there.

I had done mission work before. I had seen poverty before. It wasn't new to me. What I was looking at was deprivation.

It is only as I look back across the landscape of my life that I realize that the way we speak of idols is largely irrelevant. Only if we have seen deprivation can we realize the allure of something – anything – *tangible* upon which we might pin our hopes.

That is what is largely wrong with most modern understandings of idolatry and idols. Its not that what we say about idols is so much inaccurate as it is largely irrelevant. With very few exceptions, Idols don't stand in juxtaposition to our faith, they provide an alluring comfort with which to address our doubt. It is when all that we trust in is stripped away that idols seem somehow appealing.

Classically, idolatry is the substitution of anything for the living God. Most of us don't think of ourselves as idol worshippers. If you do, let me know, as your pastor I have a responsibility to help you work through it. Just don't tell me right after church. I have a hard time remembering who says what then.

We tend to think of idols as problems of a bygone era. That commandment in the Decalogue about not worshipping idols, "Thou shalt not have any graven images," if you recall the old King James English, seems as archaic and antiquated as the language of King James himself. And I suppose it is. We certainly don't have idols in the sense that we don't carry around talismans which we believe are imbued with magical powers.

Again, if you do, we should talk.

Perhaps you read the book, The Red Tent a few years back. I was asked to read it to review it for Biblical accuracy and it was astonishingly accurate. One of the motifs that was most accurate was the idea of household Gods, stone and wood statues that were

carried about as a failsafe against disaster and chaos. In one memorable scene, the women steal them and desecrate them as a marker of allegiance to the God of Israel.

This idea of a talisman or trinket which we may carry around seem absurd to us. But if I think back to that orphanage in Russia, faced with deprivation, if I think of the places in which hope seems to be in short supply, I can understand a certain appeal to something – anything – *tangible* to trust!

That's what is going on in this story of the golden calf, I believe. The people have only just been released from bondage. They have only just escaped from slavery in Egypt. Moses is like a parent to his people and he has gone off and left them. There is no malice in the desire for an idol. It's just the desire for some security. To a people wandering in the wilderness, it is the hope for some sense of permanence. And what could be more permanent than an image cast in gold? Gold doesn't tarnish. Gold isn't easily thrown away – it's not cheap, then or now. Into the midst of all of the intangible angst, the existential need to find something to trust, the people ask Aaron to craft something to hold up as an image. Isn't it natural to want some security?

All of the people around them had some security. As the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, as the Bible puts it, they weren't really completely alone. As they worked their way to the taking of the promised land, while the Bible presents a story of an unstopped march in to take the land from the pagan residents, the archaeological evidence tells a slightly different story. The Israelites in fact occupied the land much more gradually. They lived among the people who lived there – the people who did, in fact, worship idols. And so to this unique group of people whom God had called to live as a

witness to the living God, there was a very real, very present alternative to trusting in an intangible God. All the neighbors did it.

You know the line, “Come on! Everyone’s doing it!”

Everybody’s doing it. Hedge your bets. You can’t see your God, but you can see mine, and my crops flourished this year. My flocks are thriving. You better get yourself one.

If you know what’s good for you, you’ll acquire a God.

So Aaron made the calf.

I’m not sure that anything I can say about that is going to be all that relevant to how we live today. You have not yet asked me to melt down your jewelry and make a figurine.

Or more accurately, when I was on vacation this summer, you didn’t, to my knowledge, ask any of the guest preachers to create an idol.

But idols and idolatry can be something of a moving target.

Its very interesting to me, fascinating really, that by the time we get around in the history of the ancient Israelites to the stories of the major and minor prophets, there seems to be a rather clear trajectory to what incites God’s anger at the people. By the time we get to the later history, the Babylonian captivity, God’s people seem to have made whatever peace they need to with God’s intangible nature and don’t seem to need idols. God rides them continually at that point for their failure to live as God has called them to live regarding their neighbors. By that point, the allure of the physical idol has waned and it is an intangible caricature of God that remains, a God whose claim upon their lives could be compartmentalized into religious behavior.

*Early* in Israel's history, it is against the tangible idol that God rails through the prophetic voice of Moses. But *later* in Israel's history it is against the very *intangible* idolatry of a caricature that God rails through the prophetic voices of Amos, Hosea and the others. Indeed, idols and idolatry can be something of a moving target. That is part of their allure. That is part of their danger.

What does this have to do with poverty in Russia and archaeology in the middle east?

I wonder sometimes if the real idol is security. For those of us who lived rather sheltered, secure lives – indeed perhaps even more so for those who have experienced first hand deprivation – I wonder if the idol isn't security?

How do you define security? What would be left if it were all taken away?

I would hazard a guess that for most of us, the word security in some ways contains a financial component. Money, after all, is the tool we use to make our way in the world. If you don't think that money is important, try not having it. Yes, I realize it might be somewhat counter-intuitive for a preacher to speak of the importance of having and retaining money during a stewardship response season, but it is important sometimes to name the idols.

As much as our verbiage suggests that money is security (It's called the *Securities and Exchange Commission*, after all...) as much as our culture suggests it, money is not security. It can go away.

Economies can crash. Governments can fail. The infrastructure of an entire country, even a so-called *superpower* can crumble.

I saw it in Russia. But perhaps you remember the pictures of the Weimar government in the 1920's? There was one of a wheelbarrow full of currency being used to go grocery shopping.

I don't mean to suggest doomsday scenarios or to declare anything about the stability of our political and financial systems. I just mean to say that if they represent security to us, they're idols.

I understand that is completely counter-cultural. I understand it is counter-intuitive. I have someone who handles my savings.

And I understand that we don't think of idols that way. I understand that we use the phrase as a farce – as in *American Idol*.

But that doesn't change the reality. Now – as then – if anything stands between us and the living God, it is an idol.

That's a stark choice. God intends it that way.

You see, God is not capricious. God doesn't make the commandment because God is seeking a measuring stick for our faithfulness. That is not who God is. When I think of the commandment against idolatry and its stark warning that generations after the idolater will suffer, I have come more and more to the realization that in our context, right now, but perhaps even then, the lingering effects of trust placed wrongly can damage us for generations.

God doesn't leave any room for an alternative. God can tolerate no alternative because the choice is not between something good on the one hand and something harmless on the other. The choice is between what is *life-giving*, and *life-depleting*. And that is consistent with who God is. Just as an image of God whose love must be earned is toxic

to the core, a life lived believing that anything can be substituted for God is a life built with no foundation.

Again, I know it seems harsh. But think of the alternative?

If in fact, God is transcendent, more than our minds can comprehend, any image must by very definition do violence to the totality, the reality of God's wholeness.

That is why the reformers were so adamant about removing images of God, even to the point of defacing and destroying priceless art, a tragedy of grand proportions. But even more tragic is the possibility that God can be reduced.

Because a reducible God isn't worth our trust.

Istra is a rural village. There were government contractors who ran the school, many who hadn't been paid in months but remained because of their call to be with the children, because they knew that if they didn't, who would stay?

You don't get that sort of faith from an idol.

As we neared the end of our stay in Russia, after we had engaged in what I'm sure was contraband commerce to procure the tar to repair the roof of the school, after the money we had brought to be used to provide a gift had instead gone as a bribe to regain our passports from local thugs posing as government agents, after we had eaten food that... well, no, I'll not go share that. Lunch is coming up and I'd just as soon not relive that culinary experience verbally, after all of these things, our hosts at the school took us to their church. You remember of course, that religion was formally illegal in the USSR. They took us through the countryside to the ruins of a magnificent old church sanctuary. It was everything you expect a Russian church to be, onion domes and gilded iconography, but in ruins. The church had been bombed during the second world war,



and despite its great beauty, the government had not only failed to restore it, but had forbidden its restoration. It stood as a shell with warning tape across the doors. We were ushered into a basement in a building that stood adjacent where old Russian men and women, babushkas dressed all in black with clearly hand-crocheted head coverings were teaching the language of the liturgy to their younger children and grandchildren. The air was heavy with the smell of incense.

We worshipped with them, not understanding a word, of course, but standing at the sides in the back. As we exited the basement with our clothes smelling of incense, we were taken to a field by a lake with birch trees all around us. And our hosts said to us, “we have been underground all this time, literally and figuratively. But we have known always that God never left.”

That is what we trust.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.