

Discipleship vs. Self-idolatry

You know, for me, one of the biggest obstacles to being a follower of Jesus, and not just someone who says that I'm a Christian, is my imagination and my thought life.

I find my days constantly proliferated with images. I know I'm constantly railing on about social media, but those aren't even the images I'm talking about today. I'm talking about those images I have in my own head about what success looks like, what happiness looks like, what justice looks like.

And if I take those images out of my head, and examine them, turn them around, evaluate them in the cold light of day, I see how small minded, how distorted, and inwardly focused my imagination really is.

Perhaps you've experienced this too. Perhaps you've seen how assumptions that seemed really obvious at the time, really unproblematic, upon further reflection, and maybe after real experience, those assumption turned out to be faulty. They didn't serve you as well as you had hoped and dreamed they would.

We all have little idols. It's just that most of us don't take the time to carve or chip out an image. Most of us don't buy the gold flake or plating to adorn a literal statue or statuette.

Of course, we erect or buy shrines, we have mid-life crisis and buy expensive toys, we spend our lives pouring our labor into a legacy. And I believe that most of us are self-aware and self-honest enough to admit that this is about our egos.

Early this week, I shared some dreams with the Vestry. I've been keeping a dream list on my wall for the last couple years that a Vestry member asked me to share with the rest of the Vestry. I think I hadn't shared these dreams widely before because I wasn't sure what folks would think. Maybe I was scared to hope in them.

And I invited the Vestry to share their dreams with me and with each other. The dreams I heard from the Vestry were good dreams.

But it did make me wonder about whether and how often our dreams reflect those faulty notions of success, how often our dreams reflect the idolatry of self, versus when our dreams reflect good discipleship, when our dreams reflect Samuel asleep beside the ark.

And that brings me back to what I just said: the biggest obstacle to being a follower of Jesus, or perhaps I ought to say, one of the biggest obstacles, is ourselves and how large we all loom in our imaginations. I don't worship at the temple of some ancient idol. No, friends, more often than not, I'm at risk of worshipping at the temple of myself. And my imaginative habits are constantly sliding toward the idolatry of self.

This is an all-too-human condition.

Last week we began thinking afresh about discipleship. What makes a good disciple?

And I said last week as we recounted the beginnings of the story of Samuel and Eli, I wonder if the lack of vision Israel experienced was because God had stopped talking, or because folks like Eli had stopped listening?

Today, we hear from the Prophet Jeremiah about a worsening situation: the people have completely abandoned God in their hearts and minds.

The disconnection that we heard about last week, the loss of vision, and evolved into a complete loss of relationship. But all is not lost, because there is always time to return to the lord in whom there is always redemption, as the Psalmist reminds us.

One of the primary tasks of discipleship, one of the first in fact, is returning, repenting. Before a disciple can follow, she must stop following whatever idol has held her captive.

I think it's really interesting that Paul tells his readers to remain in the capacities they were in when they became disciples. It's not because Paul approves of slavery. Rather, it's because he's concerned that disciples reflect the humility of their master. Paul is concerned that disciples don't fall out of one slavery into another, that they don't win their freedom of literal bondage just to follow an all-too-human idol of freedom.

Rather, disciples of Jesus are people who can belong to and follow their real master, Jesus Christ, in whatever capacity they find themselves. It's in that capacity that they find opportunities to lead others to that same freedom. It's not just an imaginary freedom, but it is a freedom of the imagination, the freedom to follow Christ and lead others to Christ wherever they are.

And this freedom of the imagination is central to the ministry of Jesus, a man who walks around a depressed country side and into depressed sea-side villages, and he calls people to a different kind of purpose than the idolatry of self. He frees them from the bondage of their small-mindedness and self-importance. Most importantly, he calls them out of isolation and into relationship.

Last week's story of the calling of Nathaniel is a great example of this. We see Jesus say something to Nathaniel that doesn't just surprise Nathaniel, it convinces him at a deep and very personal level that Jesus is who he says he is. And perhaps more importantly, it show Nathaniel that this Messiah, this God wants to know Nathaniel and be known by him.

We have to assume that Jesus had similar experiences with some if not all the other disciples. Calling them out of the obscurity of their self-importance or the pits of despair in their self-wallowing, and calling them to something higher, yet, but also something more personal. He gave them visions of themselves where they were fulfilled and really happy, but they're not the center of their own stories any longer. They now have lives of freedom from the idolatry of the self, lives that can be poured out in love for others.

The God who made us knows us and loves us. This is the God we are called to serve and follow. This is the one who frees you from whatever bondage you're in.

So let your imagination be freed. Let it roam wildly in service to Jesus.

DWM+

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