

The problem with idols

Like the Athenians Paul speaks to in Acts 17, we create substitutes for the Creator.

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If you were going to create a piece of art to represent God, how would you make it? Would you use humble materials like mud and berries on a piece of scrap plywood? Would you incorporate the finest resources like gold and platinum and diamonds? Would your art be a painting? A sculpture? Something entirely different? For millennia, human beings have felt the urge to express their understanding of the divine through different media. Art, song, drama, literature, and architecture are all ways that people have attempted to encapsulate God. Some of these succeed in disclosing an aspect of God's transcendence and become well-known representations. Others don't work so well and disappear from memory.

There is a twofold problem with creating any representation of God: 1) it can never do God justice, and 2) we always forget that. God is always more beautiful, always more grand, always more powerful, always more *other* than anything we can create. That shouldn't surprise us, of course, not only because we are not God but, more importantly, because God is not created. God is the Uncreated One, the source of all being. With the surreal exception of [M. C. Escher's "Drawing Hands,"](#) the creation cannot create the creator. God cannot be comprehended much less encapsulated in a work of human hands. Any attempt to represent the Creator is doomed to fail. But that's only half of the problem.

The other half is that human beings so quickly become enamored with something they can see that they forget that it isn't actually the thing that they can't see. The Israelites have known for thousands of years that, as soon as someone creates any sort of image, statue, or other physical representation of *anything* human beings are doomed to worship it—to ascribe to the image properties of the transcendent. This is

the golden calf in the wilderness. This is the idol worship that the prophets condemned. This is the abomination that the pagan rulers set up in the Jerusalem temple.

Why do we do it? It's complicated and subtle. The root desire for idolatry is not to create something we can worship in the place of God but to get closer to the God we worship. God cannot be seen. God cannot be imagined. But wouldn't it be easier to pray if we could picture some bearded old guy in the clouds who is listening to our prayers? In our moment of deepest fear, wouldn't it be comforting to have something to hold onto to make God's ethereal presence with us something we can see and touch? In that time when we are so consumed by awe and wonder at the magnitude of God and God's creation, wouldn't it be a good idea for the worshipful artist to pour out her heart and soul into a creation that responds to God's greatness with her absolute best? All of that sounds good and right, but, of course, it's the first step to creating an inadequate substitute for the unrepresentable God.

In our reading from [Acts 17](#) on Sunday, Paul confronts the Athenians' tendency to worship idols first by appealing to the philosophical absurdity that such worship represents and then offering them a glimpse at the real, true God as shown in Jesus Christ. He flatters them by mock-praising their religiosity: "I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.'" And then he eviscerates their empty practices: "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things." Finally, in the last few words of the reading, Paul appeals to the resurrection as confirmation that the only true God, who will one day judge all things, has given that authority—that God-only identity—to the one whom he has raised: "[God] has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

For all of human history, we have wanted to see our creator. In Jesus, we do see that creator. For all of human history, we have wanted a real and clear encounter with the one who will make all things right. In Jesus, we encounter that judge. Paul's logic, presented in this moment to the Athenians, rests on his conclusion that the resurrection shows God's unique affirmation that the only one who has truly escaped death must be the one to judge the living and the dead. Jesus, therefore, shows us God. As Jesus proclaimed to the Samaritan woman, we worship what we know. There

is no reason to create an image for it. God has given himself to us—not as an image but as God himself, the Incarnate Son.

Maybe I'm making this up, but it seems to me that the people who have the deepest practice of maintaining a relationship with God through Jesus Christ are the ones who least need an idol to hold on to. For those whose connection with God is made real in Jesus, the need to attempt to make it real in other ways fades away. What about us? What about the church? What idols have we created as an attempt to get closer to God? In what ways have they become a substitute for God? How might a deeper discovery of Jesus—God given to us—remind the church that we worship what we know, what we have seen, what has been shown to us once and for all?

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