

Understanding idolatry (Jeremiah 2:4-13)

Jeremiah's message for Judah cuts deeper than our petty loyalties.

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Idolatry is among our most abused theological words. We can apply it whenever people show intense devotion to anything we don't like: consumerism, status, fitness, Alabama football. Granted, Alabama football devotion is kinda scary. But those critiques seem trite. Few of us have considered changing gods, to use Jeremiah's categories. Thus, when a prophet like Jeremiah condemns idolatry, we might be tempted to check out. Admittedly, we are not rock solid in faith. We question our Christianity, struggling to hold onto the notion that a loving God exists. But we're not trading gods.

Jeremiah's complaint cuts deeper than our petty loyalties. It drives right to the heart of Israel's relationship with God. This passage sounds like a charge delivered by a prosecuting attorney: "Therefore once more I accuse you." God recalls Israel's previous love, which delivered them from slavery into a fruitful land. But now, the accuser presses, the people have failed to seek God, even to think of God. Twice he decries how the people and their priests have forgotten even to ask, "Where is the LORD?" This is the heart of the matter: Idolatry follows the people forgetting their covenant relationship with God.

A prophet's message can come off as scolding. But scolding rarely creates a positive reaction. If it did, more churches would be thriving, because we sure like to scold. It sounds hopelessly naive to say we need to love God more. But that's precisely Jeremiah's message for Judah.

The [Gottman Institute](#), founded by therapists and researchers John and Julie Schwartz Gottman, has won international acclaim for its work on couples therapy. The Gottmans found a highly accurate sign of happy relationships: Successful couples fondly [remember the early days](#) of their relationship. Their present joy manifests itself in faithful memory.

Faith communities sometimes get tangled up in the countless details of keeping things running. We help ourselves by creating space to remember, to celebrate. In many Black church and evangelical communities members learn to testify; that is, we learn to share how we have experienced God's grace and love active in our lives. Our testimonies strengthen us when we speak; all the more so when we listen. Chances are, we've come to know God primarily in community, so common testimony builds us all up.

Mainline churches have much to learn from this practice. Our liturgies often rehearse God's wonderful deeds. Certainly our hymns do. Perhaps we can also help one another by recalling—out loud—how we came to know and love God at various stages of our lives and how we, as communities, have experienced God's care together.