

not having a car and how most politicians begin to stutter when asked about mobility without the automobile as option of first choice.

The bottom line to all this is that we take ourselves – and our creations and our thoughts – too seriously.

III

Such humility describes a way out of the conundrum in which we often find ourselves – especially when we find ourselves in conflicts about matters of faith.

For faith describes a relationship, not assent to certain ideas. We need to remind ourselves of that when we get tied up in conflicts. Who can have a relationship to an object or an idea, some abstract concept? Christian faith is not just any kind of relationship; it is a relationship of trust. Faith is trust in the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

That is our confession. We cannot prove that. But who needs to, anyway? How on earth can you prove a relationship? Have you ever succeeded in proving a friendship – or love in a certain person? I never have – and I do not believe anyone can.

We can recognize different actions or words, etc. that may confirm – or shake – our trust. But that is all far from being a logical proof – or disproof.

The twist or turn in the story of the gold calf is that in the end God shows he has faith in us, his creation, these

fallible, fascinating beings made in the divine image – even when we have no faith in him.

This leads God to do something amazing, almost superhuman, truly divine: God changed his mind! Listen to the closing verse of the reading once again: **And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people** (Ex 32:14).

It happens so fast that we almost miss it. Think about it a moment. The maker of heaven and earth, the god that is all-knowing, all-powerful changed his mind! And THAT is indeed something that can give us hope!

If God can listen to another perspective, reconsider and then change his mind, certainly we should be able to. Should we not – with his help and the help of our sisters and brothers – be able to listen to another perspective, reconsider, change our minds – and renounce our idols?

I certainly hope so – and believe so.
Amen!

¹*The Large Catechism* III, Part First: The First Commandment, Translated by F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau Published in: Triglott Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921, pp. 565-773.

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KINGDOM SEASON

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When I read the Old Testament Lesson I am using as my sermon text this morning, the first thing that came to mind was an old cartoon I have used in confirmation classes on the First Commandment: Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. It shows a man in a dark business suit kneeling before an altar made up of all sorts of thing we consider absolutely necessary – like a TV, an iPhone, a notebook and so on – and mounted on the top this rather high altar – at least four times as tall as he is – is a Daimler star.

I am sure that every one of us could add his or her favorite to this wonderful collection of many of our modern idols.

This morning I would like to reflect with you on our modern, contemporary idols.

I

Of course, the easiest idols to deal with are those we can see: things. Things we have. Things we want,

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but do not yet have. Things, which would make us happy, satisfied – at least happier and more satisfied than we are now – if we could only get them.

Exodus 32:7-14, Luke 15:1-10

As convenient and practical it may be, if we had an iPhone 11, for example, it is not the object itself that makes it so important to us. It is what we associate with it.

That is most obvious when we look at our clothes – or maybe our cars. For some of my pupils it is very important to wear a T-Shirt or pants from a certain manufacturer. Tell me what you wear and I'll tell you who you are – what you are worth.

The sin of idolatry is less a matter of the object itself than it is – in Luther's words – a matter of the *heart*,

*which stands gaping at something else, and seeks help and consolation from [that].*¹ What matters is not what we say it important to us, rather what our behavior shows .

I can easily say I can live quite well without my smartphone, for example. However, when I start to freak out because I can't find it, my behavior betrays something about heart that my words belie. If we reflect a moment, I am sure that we all can remember something like this.

I do not want to belabor this point. It is actually rather obvious. Still, it needs to be mentioned – and we need to keep an eye on it.

II

More difficult – and much more dangerous – are our immaterial idols: our ideas, our convictions, our interpretations of events or persons.

Even before the internet and social media made it so much easier, we were quite capable of landing very quickly in a bubble that re-enforces our views, so that we are absolutely certain that we are right and they are wrong!

This movement is much more seductive and much more dangerous than overvaluing any object. For most of the time when this happens, we do not realize what is going on.

Consequently, we remain in this bubble of ours, see everything through this perspective and ignore – or filter out – anything that could lead us to ask pesky questions about our way of seeing things.

This tends to happen frequently in the realm of religion and politics – and sports. Just try to explain to a Real Madrid fan why FC Liverpool is actually a much better and attractive club, then you will understand what I mean.

This is an especially great danger when conflicts erupt about things that are very important to us. This is particularly the case in families and groups. Emotions run so wild that they practically blind us and turn off our logic. Our well-trained abilities to observe and analyze what is going on and then to understand what is going on just disappear – at least for the most part.

Instead we remain convinced that what we have seen, what we have heard, what we have figured out is exactly the way it is – and all the others who see it differently are wrong.

When this happens, poof, like a mad sorcerer we have created an idol.

And this idol, this ideology, this cast-iron way of seeing things has imprisoned us. We do not have it under control. It has us under control.

The Israelites at the foot of Sinai thought that with their idols they now had everything under control. In reality it was the other way around. They were at the whims of their idols, panic-stricken that they might in some way displease their new “gods”.

And when we get tied up in a conflict in this way, there is no way out.

There is a way out, fortunately, but it is an unpleasant one. Nonetheless, it is a way out that is fundamental to our Judeo-Christian tradition: We have to confess our sin. To be concrete, we have to give up our idol. We have to recognize that we have missed something, that we have misunderstood something. We have to admit that which is probably the most difficult thing for a human being to admit. We have to admit that we were wrong. Not necessarily 100%, but so wrong in our perceptions and interpretations, that we were wrong for the most part. It is not easy. We are proud creatures, proud of our highly developed analytical skills, proud of our ability to recognize and see things that others do not. We are, however, also sinners. And that means we make mistakes – sometimes very big ones.

Why do I maintain that our ideas are much more dangerous idols than things? They are among other things more dangerous because our

ideas can lead to things that strengthen our ideas and blind us to unintended consequences of our ideas because the things are so much fun. This is rather abstract. Fortunately, the Fridays for Future protests illustrate this point very well.

At the bottom of all the environmental problems related to our overreliance on the automobile is our exaggerated value we give the idea of mobility. Being able to go exactly when I want to go where I want to go is a function of freedom. And freedom is probably the most important thing for us in our modern western culture. And that all means, among other things, that we just have to have a car!

Never mind the sometimes real and reasonable reasons for going by car. Most of the time it is not necessary. We could go by U-Bahn, by bus, by train or ride with other people, by bike or even walk, but we do not want to! We set up our mobility and the freedom we associate with it as an idol like the man in the business suit in the cartoon. All of the things the young people are protesting about every Friday, the consequences for the environment and thus the future all follow from this immaterial idol, mobility at all cost.

We can observe how strongly this idol has us in its grips when we notice how we flinch at the idea of