

7TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C
“American Idols”

If there is anything non-negotiable in the Christian message it is the commandment to love. Yet, we read this gospel today and we look for ways to negotiate it away. Certainly Jesus was speaking hyperbole here, wasn't he? He must have been exaggerating. Love our enemies? Turn the other cheek? To the thief who takes your cloak, offer your tunic as well? Thank goodness we don't wear cloaks and tunics anymore. We negotiate around the commandment of love unconsciously. We all do it. We can receive the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity, at Mass and then go home and refuse to speak to our spouse, and we can't even see the hypocrisy. We hear a murder victim's family member angrily tell the murderer at sentencing, *“I hope you rot in hell!”* And around her neck we notice a cross she is proudly wearing. Can you imagine Jesus ever saying such a thing? Never!

The greatest threat to our living a full and happy life in America is not atheism. The greatest threat today, ironically, is what it was for the Jews in the Old Testament, idolatry. In those days it was Baal or some pagan god that caused the Israelites to be unfaithful to God and God's plan for them. Today our idols are much more subtle than that. An indicator that something may be an idol is if we think it is above criticism. It can be as simple as a cheap bottle of wine for the one who cannot imagine life without a drink nearby. Alcohol becomes a god. Pick your addiction: drugs, pornography, food, power, whatever. If your desire for that trumps all other things, especially your relationships, that is your idol, that is your god.

Idols most often grow out of good and valuable things to us. Desire is good, but when a desire becomes unlimited, we are in trouble. The Dominican priest, Father Timothy Ratcliff, defines a glutton as someone

whose desire for food has lost contact with his body. As I say, desire is a good thing. But it must be tempered. Unfortunately, Prohibition from 1920-1933 and the Women's Christian Temperance Union gave "temperance" a bad name. Prohibition and temperance are not the same thing. One says, "*Never.*" The other says, "*with moderation and reason.*"

The American Idol is more than the winner on a TV show. Wealth is an American Idol when it becomes the object of unlimited desire. Wealth is a good, but it can be distorted into a god, something that is above criticism in our American system. If it makes money, what else is necessary? The show 20/20 last Friday night was about people can rip off other people legally. Their motive is nothing more than to make more money. If it is not illegal, it must be okay. Right? Wrong. Such deceptive schemes to make money violate the rights and dignity of other human beings. They also violate our gospel today.

Private property is an American idol. It has become an absolute right. We can do anything we want with our stuff. After all, it belongs to me. Who can criticize that? Again, it takes something good, private ownership, something that is necessary, important but conditional and makes it an absolute. St. Ambrose said, "*The bread you keep for yourself belongs to the hungry, the cloak you store away belongs to the naked, the money you store away is the price of a poor man's freedom.*" Basil the Great said that "*the rich who keep for themselves more than they need are like people who buy all the seats in the theatre and then do not let other people in to see the play.*" Can this in any way reflect the gospel of Jesus? Of course not; yet, being rich enough to do such things is part of the American dream.

In hearing this, we feel ourselves getting a little uncomfortable, even a bit defensive maybe. I said our idols were subtle. But why would we ever

want to defend greed and selfishness? Is the so-called “American Way” above criticism? I don’t have the answers to the issues involved here, and I love America, but we could make America an idol, too, if we are not careful.

Some may think that this gospel makes it sound like we are making an idol out of love. Well, yes we are, in one sense, but we must remember that an idol is a false God, and God is love, and wherever love is God is.

Remember the scene in the Star Wars movie when Luke Skywalker was having that light-saber dual with Darth Vader, his father. Darth Vader did not want to kill his son. He wanted him to come over to the dark side where he was. He wanted him to abandon his pursuit of justice and goodness. He wanted Luke’s heart to fill with hatred toward him, and then he would be just like he had become himself. In that way he would know that he, Darth Vader, had won the battle.

Remember, the battle we are involved with in our world today is above all a battle for our hearts and souls. There is only one true God, and Jesus showed what that God was all about by the way he lived, by the way he loved, by the way he treated the weak, the poor and the outsider; by the way he challenged the wealthy and powerful, by the way he suffered and the way he died. Why is it we are so ready to negotiate away this magnificent legacy, the commandment to love, the key to happiness; the key to living a full life, and yes, even the key to peace?

May the Eucharist we celebrate today continue the transformation of our hearts.