

For grad school, I went to the University of Missouri. To study religion. I went from being one of about 30 Christian student in my classes at Bible college to the only Evangelical Christian in my department. The other grad students began affectionately referring to me as the religious studies department's "token Christian". Over that first year, I fell into that identity. Though at first I was intimidated, scared to speak up, I soon fell into the role of "token Christian" - it gave me the courage to offer my opinions and ideas. By the end of my first year, I was confident as the "token Christian" student, the conservative kid from the Bible college who was learning how to think about religion in new ways.

[Picture of Tom] Then, in my second year, I got a nasty surprise. I sat down to my first class of the semester, and there was a new guy, a first-year student. He introduce himself as Tom, recently graduated from another Bible college and now here to study religion at Mizzou.

I felt an instant, immediate dislike for this Tom. Who did he think he was? Didn't he know that *I'm* this department's token Christian student? How *dare* he... do the exact same thing I'm doing.

That's a weird reaction, right?

Here's a guy with whom I probably have *more* in common than anyone else in my department, particularly when it comes to how we're approaching the material we're studying. And I feel rage rather than excitement. I see an enemy rather than an ally.

Because he threatened the identity I'd adopted for myself.

We often get mad when someone threatens our identity. This is the same sort of impulse that lies behind the so-called Mommy Wars, the battles waged in bento box lunches, Pinterest boards and Facebook walls. Moms who desperately *love* their children are driven to insane measures to prove they're the best moms, better than these other moms (which where do they *even get the TIME* to do that stuff?!).

Or in the guy who takes fantasy sports a *little* too seriously, who fancies himself the next Tom Landry and goes ballistic when he doesn't bring home a win.

Or have you ever had a supervisor who's never even *held* your position, who's never around your work, who doesn't have the first clue what your work entails, who then reprimands or writes you up? How do you feel? *Angry*.

It's interesting because not everything gets us all rage-y like that. I'm a lot more likely to get angry if you question my ability to teach than to sink a free throw.

[A bullseye with ME at the center and various things closer and further away] The things and people that anger us are those that challenge our identity. They slip through our defenses and

get to the very core of who we are. I know I'm terrible at basketball. Fun to play, but I know I'm awful. If you want to feel like LeBron, challenge me to a pick-up game. And you can make fun of me all you want. I'll probably even join you. Because I don't see myself as a baller. It's not who I am.

But I *love* to teach the Scriptures. I pour a lot of myself every week into the preparation, the crafting and the delivery of teaching. Close to the core of me, you'll find the label Teacher. Just like back in grad school, I was the token Christian student.

When our core identity is challenged, we get angry. That's why when Tom showed up, I got angry. Tom didn't *do* anything to me. At all. We hadn't even met. He simply introduced himself and his identity - which was so similar to mine, was a threat to who I had allowed myself to become.

[Pic?] And that's the key - we allow our identity to be shaped. We allow ourselves to become defined by certain aspects of our lives, and those become foundational. They're what we build the rest of our identity on. So when those are challenged, we're rocked, and that makes us angry, protective.

If you're with me so far, you're probably thinking, "Oh, that's a cool perspective, a nice way to look at my core self, my identity." But we're not done - if we look at ourselves through this lens, if we ask ourselves, "What have I built my identity on?", we can begin to become whole.

[I can imagine the "label" becoming the ground I'm standing on] Because the reality is that we've all built our lives, our Selves, on things that can't sustain the weight of our Selves. We've grounded our Selves on shaky foundation and we know it. The things we've put our trust in turn out to be not so reliable, and when they begin to crumble, our fear of falling, of losing our Selves turns us into something ugly.

We *shouldn't* build our core identity around our fantasy team. Or our place in a group of friends. That's pretty obvious. But we also *shouldn't* build our identity on our work ethic or our role as a spouse or parent.

Now wait, you want to say. Because you've realized you ground your identity in being a good spouse. Or a parent. Or a hard worker. Or especially religious. You look at those things and say, They're good! How can they be a bad foundation? for my identity, my self?

And yet. We have all seen parental love and desire to protect become an overbearing suffocation. Or a parental desire for acceptance become a passive permissivism. Many of us have experienced how unstable the job market is - what happens when all the hard work you've prided yourself on for years amounts to nothing, when the company to whom you've been so loyal shows no loyalty in return?

What happens when the pride we take in something turns ugly? Or the love we have for someone warps us into someone desperate and bitter?

The dark truth none of us wants to admit is that all those things - even the very best things in our life - eventually let us down. *Why?* Why do the things and people we love always let us down? And can we find a more stable ground, a firmer foundation for our lives and our selves?

[what could this look like?] Yes, we can. And the good news is that once we let go of all these false foundations that are not enough, once we ground our identity in God, once we ruthlessly root out the false pictures of ourselves we've collected, we find those things we've discarded transformed, resurrected and restored. They are returned to us beautiful and whole.

When you learn not to place your identity in your kids, you become a better parent. When you learn not to place your identity in your spouse, you become a better lover. When you learn not to place your identity in your work ethic, you become a better employee. When you learn not to place your identity in your loyalty or your honesty or your reliability, you become a better friend.

[Scripture Slide] I know that's a bit abstract, so if you have a bible, turn with me to Exodus 20. (In our bibles, you can find that on page XXX). As you're turning or clicking there, these are the famous 10 Commandments. God has freed Israel from slavery in Egypt and they're on their way to the Promised Land. God leads them to a mountain, where they establish a formal covenant between God and the people. This is like a marriage ceremony.

This is important - the Jewish people didn't see the 10 Commandments as a list of arduous rules they had to follow. For them, these laws were more like marriage vows. They were not an obligation, but an opportunity. They had the privilege of keeping this covenant. Out of all the people in the world, God had chose them, and they *got to* live as God's people.

Let's read together, beginning in verse 1:

God spoke all these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

"You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

“You shall not murder.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” -- Exodus 20:1-17

We could obviously do a whole series on each of these, but I want to look at them together. What does it mean that God gave the people *this* list of vows? A great way to look at the whole list is to go to that second command:

“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.”

This is the "don't make idols" commandment, and it's one that we find probably the least applicable today. [Picture of Indiana Jones and the idol from beginning of Raiders?] For most of us, Idols are primitive superstitions, statues of tree gods or rock gods or something. We hear God say, "don't make statues of other gods" and we think, "Whew! That one was easy!"

But the idea of not worshipping other gods is really the first commandment - don't have other gods before me. What God is concerned with here is something different, and just as dangerous.

Everyone in the ancient world created images of their gods. [Egyptian gods] The Egyptians - where Israel just came from - had images of all their gods. You've seen them in hieroglyphics or if you watch StarGate. [Add in some Canaanite gods] And the Canaanites, who lived in the Promised Land where Israel was headed, made images of their gods - gods like El and Ba'al and Ashera. They called these images 'idols'.

Idols functioned as place-holders. In worship, they took the place of the gods, so you could focus your attention. They represented the god in the rituals. They were *images* of the gods. Pictures of the gods. They pointed to the gods' presence.

And Yahweh, the god of Israel, forbade Israel to make any images. Yahweh said, You will not make any representations of me.

Why?

Most basically, because Yahweh has already created an image of himself. In the first creation story in Genesis 1, God says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness..." So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. -- Genesis 1:26-27

Humanity is God's image. You and I, we are God's images. We represent God to the world. We represent God's presence.

And if you're thinking, "Woah. That's a big responsibility. I'm not sure I'm up for that," then you know what the allure of idols is.

Idols are images of God that take our place as God's image-bearers. Idols are a cop-out. They make it easy for us to be less than God created us to be. We can abdicate our responsibility to be pictures of God's love and mercy because we allow an idol to take the place of God.

This is why idolatry is dangerous. They promise what they can't deliver and they ultimately make us less than we were created to be. All of the commandments God gave are about what it means to be images of God, and idols distract us from that. They make us less than what we *should* be.

We look to our spouses for acceptance and love, but we're all selfish. Your spouse will eventually fail you (and you will fail your spouse, sooner or later).

We look to our children for a legacy. They represent our hopes and dreams for the future. But children have an exasperating way of becoming their own people, no matter what our dreams for them are.

We look to our jobs to provide stability and security. But no job is ever completely reliable, no retirement account safe from the ravages of an uncertain economy.

And so on and so on. We look to good things in our life to give us what we should be receiving only from God. Those good things can't give us what we want - a ground for our identity, love and stability and security and acceptance. They do for a time, but they always

fail. Not because they're bad, but because they weren't *designed* to bear the whole weight of our Selves.

So as the marriage begins to fray or the child begins to stray or the job gets wobbly, we begin to panic, to cling more tightly, our fear turning to anger because we don't know how to save ourselves.

The anger becomes injustice, inflicted on those around us. It happened for the Jewish people - turn or click over to John 2 (page XXX in the free bibles). By Jesus' day, the Law had become something they were clinging fiercely to. One of the places this was most clear was at the temple in Jerusalem. For many of the Jewish people, the Temple was the culmination of Moses' Law. If the 10 Commandments were the marriage vows, the Temple was the marriage bed, the place where the covenant was affirmed over and over, every day.

But by Jesus' day, it had become a parody of itself. Rather than standing as a picture of God's justice and mercy, it had become a place where the haves exploited the have-not's. The temple had allowed God's people to stray far from their marriage vows. Which is why, the first time Jesus visited Jerusalem, he was not pleased when he came to the temple. Let's read together, beginning in verse 13:

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. -- John 2:13-22

This is the story of Jesus' judgment on the Temple. He comes into a place that was to be the bridge between heaven and earth. But rather than bring people to God, it's now keeping them *from* God. Instead of standing for justice, the Temple is perpetuating injustice.

So Jesus acts out its destruction. Jesus says, You have failed yet again to keep the covenant. You have failed to bear God's image in the world. So God will not permit this temple to stand.

And then things get weird. Naturally, everyone is curious why Jesus is doing this, and they want to know whether he has the authority to make this announcement.

Which is pretty smart, when you think about it. Jesus claims to have a message from God, and rather than just run him out as a crazy person, they say, "Well, how do we know you're really from God?" They seem willing to listen, they just want proof.

In response, Jesus tells them if they destroy the Temple, he'll raise it again in three days, which only confuses them further. And John, the author, gives us a helpful commentary that Jesus isn't speaking about the literal Temple, but rather *his body*.

Which changes everything. Because Jesus told us the Temple didn't work. 2 Temples over 1,000 years and God's people couldn't keep the covenant. They continued to fall into idolatry, to make images of God rather than *to be* images of God.

So Jesus comes as the perfect image of God - and as the perfect image of humanity. Jesus shows us what God intended for us all along. And to prove he is who he claimed to be, he dies and is raised from the dead.

Jesus' death and resurrection are the seal of God's new covenant with us. They are the proof that God is rescuing us and making us into covenant-keepers once and for all.

If we want to be grounded, if we want a foundation for our selves that is rock-solid, that will not crumble or shake, a self that can weather every storm life brings our way, it must be founded in Jesus. Not in Temples or Laws or Family or Hobbies or Vocations or anything else.

Jesus should shape how we are married, how we work, how we parent, how we engage on social media, how we do everything. Our lives should grow from our relationship with Jesus.

Now, some of us hear that and fall into the trap of ambiguity. We think "Jesus" is basically a synonym for "good". That Jesus-shaped parenting or marrying or working or whatever is just trying really hard or being whatever version of good we think of.

But Jesus won't let us get away with that. He calls us to a very specific kind of following - the following that looks like "tear this Temple down and I'll raise it in three days." Following Jesus is always cross-shaped. It always looks like sacrificial love. It means giving ourselves for the good of the Other. Putting our spouse or our child or our boss or our friends ahead of ourselves. Prioritizing their agendas and goals ahead of our own.

If we can learn to do that, it transforms us. We become free because our identities aren't wrapped up in how we interact with other people. We're not threatened by other moms, by our spouses, by losing occasionally, by a blow-hard boss. Sure we can still be annoyed or frustrated, but we're not challenged, threatened. We're freed to be generous, loving, kind, joyful, peaceful, patient, self-controlled, gentle.

[Tom and JR.] Remember Tom, the other token Christian who came into my grad department and threatened me? Well, eventually, I got over myself and Tom and I became friends. He's a pastor in Memphis these days. He is my best friend in the world, and I'm the godfather to his three children.

I literally cannot imagine my life without Tom in it. I often think of how I acted when he first came to Mizzou, and I shudder to think what would've happened if I'd never come around. Where my life would be without his friendship.

And then I wonder how many other transformative relationships I've missed out on because I've been too caught up in myself, in protecting my own identity. How many other Toms have I missed in my life because I have failed to ground my identity in Jesus and so been focused on protecting myself rather than extending a generous, loving hand?

This is what's at stake for us. Our idols make us less than human. They make us less than the pictures of God we were created to be.

And Lent is a chance for us to pause. To acknowledge the idols in our lives. To repent, to refuse to let them continue to define us and turn back to God and find the things we had made into idols returned to us as redeemed, restored and beautiful aspects of our lives.

Communion SetUp

[Communion Slide] That journey begins for us at the Communion table. This meal points back to the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed, the night before the temple of his body was torn down. At that meal, he broke a loaf of bread and passed it to them, telling them it was his body, broken for their sin.

His body, broken for their broken images. So we take wafers to represent our own idolatry. Our own refusal to be the pictures of God we were created to be.

Later in the meal, he passed a cup of wine to them, telling them it was his blood, poured out as a new covenant between them and God. So we dip our wafers in grape juice to remember that in Jesus' death and resurrection, we have new life. God has made us to be image-bearers again.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive this meal. If you are willing to turn away from your idols, to turn back to God and find your identity in Jesus, then you're welcome to the table.

Let's pray.

Benediction and Memory Verse Challenge:

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.
-- Colossians 3:1-3 (NLT)