

Amos 5:21-27 ²¹ "I hate all your show and pretense-- the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. ²² I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. ²³ Away with your hymns of praise! They are only noise to my ears. I will not listen to your music, no matter how lovely it is. ²⁴ Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, a river of righteous living that will never run dry. ²⁵ "Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, Israel? ²⁶ No, your real interest was in your pagan gods-- Sakkuth your king god and Kaiwan your star god-- the images you yourselves made. ²⁷ So I will send you into exile, to a land east of Damascus," says the LORD, whose name is God Almighty.

"Seek the LORD"

"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." The first commandment, we all know that by heart, right? I recently heard a sermon on it by Darrell Johnson professor of pastoral studies at Regent College out in Vancouver. He dealt very superbly with the topic of idolatry and I'd like to share what he said with you. He started out by asking why God gave this commandment. Was it because God is some petty, jealous, ogre of a god who can't live without our full attention? No. God doesn't need us to be fulfilled. Rather it is the other way around. With this commandment God is telling us something about ourselves that we could not have figured out on our own. What is it? It is that we are made in such a way that only a relationship with the living God can fulfill us. You see, we were not only made by God. We were made for God and this is an incredible compliment to us. We are so wonderfully made that only the infinite God can fulfill us. God is jealous about this for us and jealous here means God's zeal to protect something precious, mainly us. Our dignity arises from and in a living relationship with the Triune God and God seeks to protect our dignity so that we can be fulfilled. Nothing false should come between us. It will only degrade us.

Because we are made for God, when we don't seek God we still have that relational hole that needs fulfilling and so we try to fulfill that relational hole with lesser gods and the consequences for us are grave. You see, addiction is the automatic consequence of breaking the first commandment. Our gods are not as obvious as they were in Amos' day. We no longer carry around little icons and fetishes (though some people do) and go and worship at shrines. Our gods are things like self-image, money, relationships, spouses, children, jobs, stuff, causes, and ism's and that ain't even getting started. We spend our time and resources, indeed our whole lives, trying to milk these non-gods for what they can't deliver. More over, and here's where it gets dark, no someone else or something else can bear the weight of our worship. The only way I can explain that is to say I think we've all been in relationships where we have either loved or been loved a little too much to the extent that it wasn't love but rather a painful exercise of infatuated addiction.

The gospel is that we have been set free from our idols by God's grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ made effective in us by the

gift of the Holy Spirit to which we respond in trust and faithfulness. Set free! Jesus has conquered and his creation has been set free. We are free and can be free from our idolatry because we are now being made alive to live in a living relationship with the living God. But...I'm still enslaved? How about you? How do we put this freedom into practice?

First, we simply have to own up to the fact that we have idols and identify what they are and here are some questions that can help. What is it that gives us security now or how about when we're 75? The answer is a potential false god. What gives me hope for the future? The answer is a potential false god. Probably the most important question is what do we fear? Fear is always a good clue to one's idol. What do we fear...losing money, then wealth is the false god; rejection; then acceptance is the false god; death; then believe it or not life or rather life the way I want it is the false god. What do we love more than anything else and can't do without? The answer is a potential false god. It is very important that we know what our idols are because what we tend to do is relate to the living God through the lenses of our commitments to our idols. Another way of saying this is that I will relate to the living God only to the degree that the living God is good for my idol. I will serve God only to the extent that it will serve my commitments to my idols. Put the idols away and seek the LORD is still what God has to say to us through Amos just as he did nearly 2,800 years ago.

The Christian faith, the living relationship with the living God in Jesus Christ by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit is a transformative experience that frees us from our idols and fulfills us in a way we could never have imagined. Diana Butler Bass, the author of Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighbourhood Church Is Transforming the Faith spent several years going all over the States visiting churches of the mainline denominations to see how a transforming faith in Jesus Christ was happening in congregations much like ours. She found a lot of neat congregations in which people were being transformed. Here's what a few of the people had to say.

- “I have become more intentional in my prayer life and in reading and studying scripture and church history. I am more attuned to my spiritual life.”
- “I get to teach and work with children and listen to their insights about God and Jesus. I get to use the artistic creative talent that God gave me in ways that make more sense than they ever did before.”
- “I think material possessions are becoming less important to me; I sense that I'm developing inner tranquility.”
- “I serve gladly (mostly!) and encourage rather than scold.”
- “I have become a more disciplined Christian—understanding that faith is action. I commit a lot more time and money to the church than I have ever done in the past.”
- “I have become more faithful and prayerful.”
- I am able to see God in others. I am able to feel God within me. I am prayerful throughout the day. I am continually learning to trust God.”
- “My choices have changed. I've given up some things I love to help bring the message for a better life to others who need it desperately.”

- “I am much more focused on the needs of others and in providing for those who are less fortunate than me. My charitable giving—both to the church and to other organizations—has increased dramatically.” (232-3)
- I would add to these, “I now find myself thankful for things that have happened to me rather than bitter, because I realize God has been able to use them to make me the a good person.”

People just like you and me said these things; people who have chosen a Mainline, tradition-ed way of being church.

Transformation to Christ-likeness happens when we seek the LORD. Transformation happens in us as individuals and as a church when we worship and pray and not only here at church but at home and even in our cars. Truly, the point is to discipline ourselves to be always worshipping and praying. Transformation happens when we read and study the Bible both here at church and at home. Transformation happens as we learn to think theologically about ourselves. This means transitioning from a mindset that asks “how am I going to find time for God in my life?” to asking “who is God and how do I fit into God’s life.” I’ve said it numerous times before, “Who are you, Jesus?” is the most important question we must ponder. Transformation happens as we serve others and learn to live the life of hospitality and material simplicity.

Life in Christ, seeking the LORD is not empty religion. It is the embryo state of the new creation. It is transformation to the new humanity that was created when Jesus rose from the dead and will come to fulfillment at the resurrection. Seeking the LORD is the only way to live the freedom from idolatry that Jesus death has won for us and the gift of his Spirit has made real for us. Seek the LORD and live. Amen.