

Disruptive Gospel: Who's Your Idol?

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Disclaimer: I am not a minister; I have no theological training. I am not a scientist. Or a mathematician. I just get offered the chance once a year to come up here and say something, and it's too good to turn down. Maybe this shouldn't even be called a message. How about "testimony." Or "food for thought."

As some of you may know, Hannes and I have been on a journey this year called Homeschooling. Following the curriculum used in the Waldorf schools, we've made our way through studies of North American geography and botany. We've learned about many ancient cultures – Mesopotamia, India, the Maya, Egypt, China, and Greece – their life, inventions, belief and wisdom. We have studied geometry, and looked at how it manifests in this glorious world of ours. I've found myself many times echoing the words of the song the children just sang. Incredible. Amazing. Indescribable.

The ancients looked into the night sky, observing and noting for hundreds of years, until they were able to understand the movements of the sun, moon, visible stars and planets. Great thinkers throughout time were able to learn more, see more, figure out more, until we know a lot – but not everything – about the universe.

Have any of you read *A Short History of Nearly Everything* by Bill Bryson? I would highly recommend it. If you're a science buff, read it; if you, like me, haven't given much thought to science since you left high school, I recommend you get the book on CD from the library and listen to it when you're captive in your car. You won't want to stop.

[space]

In the book, the author tries to give a picture of the vastness of space. (Notice how we use that special word – vast – to talk about space?) We know we are part of a vast galaxy called the Milky Way, which is estimated to have 300-400 billion stars which lie an average of 1.8 million million miles apart. But nobody really

knows for sure. The Milky Way is one galaxy in a universe that is estimated to have 140 billion other galaxies. But nobody really knows for sure.

He describes current theory of the origin of the universe: all the matter that ever would be was contained in one central speck, and then “somehow” was touched off and expanded to form this vast universe within seconds. The universe continued to expand after those first seconds and minutes, and continues to expand to this day. How did this happen? Bryson, an atheist, says “Nobody really knows for sure.” Seems to me that theory has a lot in common with the creation story from Genesis, and the creation stories of a lot of other cultures.

[atom]

And the world is also very small. An atom is not the smallest particle, because it has even smaller components. But think of this: a millimeter, which is the size of a small, typed hyphen, would be the measure of 10 million atoms.

It boggles the mind to think of how small and how large the world is. And God is in every particle of that world, from the biggest to the most minute and invisible.

I made some slides to show you some of the things that have fascinated me on our homeschool journey. Please wonder with me.

We started our botany studies learning about fungi and the lower classes of plants called the epiphytes. When we examined them with a magnifying glass, we were amazed at the detail on even the tiniest segment of growth, and found some surprising likenesses.

[epiphytes unlabeled – epiphytes labelled – white epiphytes]

Towards the end of the year, our studies came together when botany and Ancient Greece and geometry all met as one.

[six-division process x 2]

If you take a piece of string and a pencil, you can create a circle. Choose any point on the circle and you will make two intersecting circles of the same size. If you make circles at each intersecting point, you will always divide your circle into six.

[Hannes six-division or blackboard drawing]

From there, you can make a six-sided figure or hexagon. You also see two triangles which form a six-pointed Star of David.

[turning hexagons blackboard drawing – spider web]

You can turn your hexagons within another hexagon, making increasingly smaller hexagons. You can also see within the hexagon a spiral. [hexagon spiral]

The spiral will be created if you use other shapes, such as a square [square spiral], triangle [triangle spiral], an octagon [octagon spiral] or even intersecting circles. [circle spiral] All these spirals actually follow the same mathematical formula. I won't go into that, but you mathematically minded will know remember about the Fibonacci series.

[spiral pictures]

The Greek philosopher Plato said, "Geometry is knowledge of the eternally existent." How can we see anything but God in all this beauty and order?

[Athens 1 - Parthenon]

I could go on about this all day, but I have left Paul in Athens! The Parthenon looked a lot better back in his day than in this picture. He was visiting all the towns he had previously preached in to see how the new believers were doing. He'd been put in jail and in the last two cities he'd visited in Greece, he'd had to be smuggled out under cover of darkness to escape a rioting mob that was coming for him. He had just traveled over 300 miles to get to Athens.

[Athens 2 - Agora]

Paul was not one to sit and wait. He visited the synagogue in Athens, and then headed for the agora, the marketplace, which was the heart of life in Athens. The agora was a large section of the city, about 30 acres in size. It had open-air markets and indoor shopping centers, temples, covered teaching porches, statues, government buildings, offices, and an auditorium. The agora was a place to meet and discuss ideas, to debate and learn, to watch an athletic contest or

hear music, and to make business deals. It was the ancient Greek version of a power lunch. It was the place where democracy was born. Philosophers, leaders, athletes, merchants, and citizens of Athens gathered there in large numbers. Since much of the manual labor in Athens was done by slaves, and women were confined to the home, the men of Athens had a lot of time to get together and discuss.

Paul got involved in discussions and debates with some of the philosophers. Some of their schools of philosophy are mentioned by name in the passage. And when our reading begins, Paul has been hauled to the Areopagus.

[Athens 3 - Areopagus]

The Areopagus is a high rock outcropping in Athens. It got its name from Ares, the god of war, who, according to legend, was put on trial there for killing one of the sons of Poseidon, the god of the sea.

In Ancient Greece, it was the place of a court that decided the fate of anyone who committed a deliberate homicide. Later, it also was in charge of investigating corruption. There are various opinions of why and how Paul was taken up there to speak with the Areopagus. Was he arrested and on trial, or was he a guest speaker, asked to come talk to the court about the radical ideas he was spreading around Athens? Hard to say, but what has been recorded is a dramatic and well-crafted speech that Paul gave, in fact, the longest one of his that's been passed down.

Paul says many things, and I would invite you to take your bulletin home and look up the passage to read and think about it more. Like any good speechmaker, he builds rapport with his audience by acknowledging their religious practice. He quotes the words of one of their own philosophers, who said that we are the offspring of God. Using logic worthy of any Greek philosopher, if God made us, it makes no sense to worship an idol, which he defines as "an image made by human design and skill."

[golden calf screen]

I remember being a kid in Sunday School and hearing that we shouldn't worship idols like the faithless Israelites did with the golden calf. And I would think, "That's really stupid! Why would anyone want to worship a statue? I'm only eight years old and I know that!"

Through the years, I've heard many sermons about not worshipping idols, about not worshipping money, or prestige, or power. And I would think, "Well, I'm not really so interested in those things."

But I know there are idols. They may not be golden statues, or even anything physical. Idols are things that pull us away from remembering that God is in us and around us, all the time. Let me repeat that: idols are things that pull us away from remembering that God is in us and around us, all the time.

The thing about idols is that they always have something really good about them. That golden calf was nice. It was gold. It was beautiful. But it became an idol when the people forgot that God was their everything, and they decided to hedge their bets by looking elsewhere for what they could only get from God.

So this morning I invite you to consider: Who's Your Idol? What are the things that cause you to not recognize God in the very world God made?

Golden calves are hard to come by in our modern world, but there are plenty of other candidates for idols. Since I've been thinking about this for weeks, I made a list of ideas. How about.....

- Quest for experiences – the best food, the finest wines, the most extreme challenges – all fun things, until it becomes the idol.
- Concept of myself – I am this way, don't expect me to change; or I am a person of no talent; or longing for a self who used to be (when I was – fill in the blank – skinnier or younger or more athletic or had more energy.....) Is this idol keeping me from living well and freely in God?
- Freedom from discomfort, wanting to live in ease and take the easy road?
- A political stance or a vision for the world that becomes my idol, Do my beliefs cause me to scorn people who see otherwise?

- Busyness – Do my projects and causes, no matter how worthy, take me away from the realization that God is with me?
- Science – Have I taken God out of his own creation? Is there for me a separation of God from what God has created?
- Concept of God – Have I made a “designer God” for myself, saying “I believe God is this and not that.” Or “I will allow this name to be used for God, but not that one.” Do I remember that I am the offspring of God, not the maker of God?
- The new idol: Technology – an overt belief – technology can solve anything; instead of worshiping the golden calf, am I worshiping the glowing screen? Have you ever had the experience of going online to check emails and three hours later you’re reading about what became of the Brady Bunch? How about that phone? There’s an idol that actually calls to you! It rings! You can be doing the most loving thing and ding, off we fly. Or looking at the phone when God walks into the room (in the form of a human) and you didn’t even look up?

Lots of questions, and there will be more before the service is over. In a few minutes, there will be music and scripture readings to help us reflect more about idols.

What did Jesus have to say on this topic? Nothing. He didn’t say anything about idols. He took more of a positive parenting approach by setting a good example and telling us what TO do. When he was tempted by Satan during his 40 days in the wilderness, he didn’t accept any God-substitutes and finally put an end to the matter, saying, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and God alone shall you serve.”

When he was asked what the most important commandments were, he said, “Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind” and “Love others as you do yourself.” That doesn’t leave much room for idols, does it?

[space screen]

No matter what idols we put before God, no matter how many ways we find to separate ourselves from God, no matter how many layers of complication and argument and logic and opinion we lay down, there is always the simple truth that God is all there is. God is in us and around us, from smallest particle to the farthest reaches of an unimaginable universe. As Paul said, quoting the Greek philosopher: in God we live and move and have our being. Not only that, but God is always seeking us, calling us to put away our idols and live in his presence. That's something I want to try to remember more. How about you?