

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Twilight of the Idols

Mr. Kevin Laskowski

*A version of this sermon was delivered August 27, 2017 at the Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring, VA.*

**Readings for Proper 16A**

Isaiah 51:1-6

Psalm 138

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

**Focus:** In Christ, we find a new identity, our true identity. We must be ready to see with Christian eyes and love with Christian hearts. We must be ready to participate in what Jesus Christ is doing in the world—to live out the Christian drama. This may require us to let go of, and even combat, certain myths and markers of other identities. In this time and place, that includes monuments to the Confederacy, which are *prima facie* idols, to be destroyed, removed, redone, as love and truth permit.

**Function:** To encourage parishioners to see certain identities as potential idols, to be confronted in truth and love and reconciled in Christ

**Prayer**

May we go to whomever God sends us. Let us speak whatever God commands us. And let us not be afraid. AMEN.

**Sermon**

I love movies, even bad movies. Years of premium cable will do that to you. Our adult education forum *Jesus Goes to the Movies!* took place today and continues next week. I've got movies on the mind and heart. I love the dreck, even and especially romantic comedies. In fact, at our wedding reception, tables weren't numbered but named for all the silly sentimental cinema Allison and I had seen together since our teens. The head table was called *Love Actually*.

Here's the plot of just about every romantic comedy: Two people find each other; they dislike, even hate, each other but fall in love despite themselves—until one of them does something to screw it all up. This requires a grand gesture of some kind to win the other back, usually by running through the rain to make a public declaration of love at somebody else's wedding or at the end of an airport terminal.

Happily ever after. Roll credits.

And we hear something of the romantic comedy in today's Gospel. I have movies on the mind and heart, and I want you to think cinematically, imaginatively here. We are taken to the busy district of Caesarea Philippi, and Jesus asks Peter amid all the noise of the city, and it's probably raining, "What is this, Peter? What are we doing? Preaching? Healing? Proclaiming the good news?"

Peter is quiet; he shuffles his feet in the puddles.

"C'mon, Peter. What am I to you?"

"Jesus, you know I love you. You're the Messiah, the son of the living—"

"Be quiet," says Jesus. "Just be quiet. You had me at Messiah."

With Peter's confession of faith, a declaration of fidelity, God has been reunited with his beloved bride, God's people, the church, represented in Peter.

Happily ever after. Roll credits.

Today's gospel, however, is not—only—a romantic comedy.

See, I had to sneak some Gospel of John and its language of love to make that romantic comedy analogy work. This episode appears, in one form or another, in all four gospels, so it's terribly important for us. Matthew's version, however, is unique. For instance, it's the only one, the only gospel in fact, that uses the word "church." This is terribly important to what it means to be a church. Now, like Mark, Matthew sets the story in Caesarea Philippi, but Matthew adds the phrase "Son of God" to Peter's confession of faith. Why? What is the author of Matthew trying to tell us? What does God want us to know today?

He wants us to know that we are not only living a romantic comedy. We are living the Christian drama. We can and we must live the historical epic, the political thriller, the great drama, even a tragedy on the nature of humans before their God. Jesus tells his disciples—he tells us—that our relationship with God, our faith, is not solely a matter of individual intellectual assent, being able to make a coherent, clever declaration in the rain. Faith is not a matter of self-fulfillment or self-realization, of happily ever after.

Rather, once you know Jesus, everything else has to be re-examined against the glory of the true light of the world. Faith has religious, social, and political consequences. Faith confronts its idols—or it doesn't really exist.

I want you to think cinematically, imaginatively. Think of the setting. Caesarea Philippi was built near a spring dedicated to the Greek god Pan. Pan was worshipped there in wild outdoor parties, giving us our word "panic." A grotto was built around the spring, statues were added, and the iconography of the whole Greek pantheon was carved into the cliffs at the base of Mount Hermon. For more than two centuries, this place was sacred in pagan worship. Then, Herod the Great, who ruled in the years before Jesus' birth, built a temple dedicated to Caesar Augustus and Rome nearby. The city was now named Caesarea Philippi, to distinguish it from Caesarea Maritima, the other city on the Mediterranean coast dedicated to the empire.

Jesus has taken his disciples to a place known, defined, even named for its idols—in order to confront them. Imagine Jesus, standing amidst the crowds, in a busy marketplace. "What are these people saying?" he asks. And the disciples reply. Jesus then asks, "But what do you say?"

"And don't just tell me," Jesus seems to say. "Tell them—the idols of false gods and fallen empires. Tell Pan what you think of him. Tell Caesar what you think of him."

Speaking for the disciples, Peter says, "You are the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one who will save humanity from its false worship and its fallen states. Pan? He is a statue. You are the Son of God." Peter proclaims. Roman emperors claimed many titles—First of His Name, Lord of the Andals and the First Men, Maker of Chains, Father of Dragons—but, for those of you who are not *Game of Thrones* fans, they also claimed divinity and the title—Son of God.

Thus, in Matthew, Jesus takes Peter and the disciples to a place where their declaration of faith can and should be seen for what it is—treason against the state and blasphemy against its gods. They are revolutionaries now. They are not to conform to this world; they are transformed by the renewing of their minds. They are the Jesus movement, the church, and not even the gates of hell can stand in their way.

A great deal of ink—and too much blood—has been spilt lately on what we are to make of our own statues. I have been told about Confederate monuments, memorials, flags, and heroes and how I am to feel about them given my Southern heritage, my Virginia home, and my white skin. I

have been told how to feel given my commitment to social justice and my generally liberal outlook, except for that conservative streak that keeps coming up, much to my liberal friends' annoyance.

Jesus asks us to confront the statues of our day, not as residents of particular state or holders of a certain political ideology, but as Christians. What is Jesus to you? Before anything else, we are defined by our relationship to God in Christ. We who pursue righteousness must look to our father Abraham and mother Sarah, to our true heritage. Before we were anything else, politically, socially, we were fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God.

So what is the nature of our relationship? Is Jesus a teacher? A prophet? The Son of God? Give it a label. Now ask yourself: what does that mean?

If Jesus is a teacher, what does our teacher say? The teacher tells us we cannot serve God and Mammon. The teacher tells us to love our neighbors and our enemies. Does that statue proclaim the same?

If Jesus is a prophet, what does he prophesy? He carries the message of the Father, who commanded the destruction of false altars to false gods in the high places, willed an end to sacrifices on their behalf. That which we build will wear out like a garment. God makes all things new, heaven and earth will pass away. Can that statue stand against such power?

If Jesus is the Son of God, what is a statue to me? I hear God speaking a word too long-ignored, a word that cracks every hateful stone, melts every racist bronze, and burns every oppressive emblem. I don't just see schools being renamed, I see valleys being lifted and mountains laid low - I have seen Stone Mountain—with its depiction of Davis, Jackson, and Lee—reduced to rubble.

But that impulse troubles me. Wouldn't that make me ISIS or the Taliban, a religious fanatic destroying the world's largest bas-relief sculpture because the KKK worshiped at its altar? However warranted such apocalyptic destruction might be and deserved it is, I have to look to Jesus and his loving, gentle resistance to the powers-that-be. Perhaps the fire will come and must come next time. I won't stand in the way, but, until then, there is the hard work of, one by one, tearing that statue down but moving another, maybe leaving that plaque as it is but discussing how to rehabilitate another. Jesus asked us to view our world in a new light. He didn't command the destruction of Pan's grotto or the Roman temple. Rather, he tore his own temple down and raised it up in three days.

God will bring the high places low, but also give us new hearts. I knew of a parish that in my teens was still flying a Confederate flag next to the American flag. I know of another parish's celebration of Robert E. Lee. I don't see any substitute for the slow work of the Spirit, taking the Gospel to each of our brothers and sisters we believe are in the wrong, stating our case, attempting to turn their hearts, and repenting of our own sins, known and unknown. Paul did not wage war against the Romans. He wrote them letters, it is a love letter which declares we are all connected, inseparable members of one another and of one body.

I believe that every vestige of our racist legacy is and should be toppled - along with - and especially - the racism that doesn't carry a swastika for easy identification. Sometimes, racism carries my flag. Sometimes, it carries a badge and a gun. And for too much of our history, it has carried a cross. And we need to oppose those evils. We must oppose those evils. And we do this by looking at them in the light of Christ. Jesus managed to carry apocalypse and gentleness in his heart, divine wrath and divine love simultaneously. In Jesus, mercy and truth came together. He was somehow faithful to both. That's my task, that's our task.

That work of loving with new hearts begins by seeing with new eyes. We are not to conform to the world's ways of seeing and doing. We are transformed. True, you're not going to solve the problems of the world in the next week, but decide today who Christ is for you: teacher, prophet,

king, Son of God—make whatever faith claim you can. Give it a label. And try to live out the implications. Confront your own idols, that which stands in the way of love of God and neighbor. Ask yourselves: If I saw you, looked at how you spent your time, heard the way you saw things, would I see Christ? Would I know you were connected to Holy Cross? If I attended your committee meeting or heard you sing, if I saw your Facebook page or heard your politics, would I see Christ? Would I hear God's voice in what you did? Would I see Jesus in your actions?

If we put Christ first, we can be confident that whatever needs loosing will be liberated, what needs binding will be bound. What merits preservation will be preserved. What must be destroyed will meet its end.

Because as much as we are living a historical epic, it remains a comedy, too.

And here's the plot of just about every romantic comedy: People find each other; they dislike, even hate, each other but fall in love—they are one—despite themselves—until somebody does something to screw it all up. This requires a grand gesture of some kind. For the Christian, that grand gesture comes from God in Jesus Christ, who reconciles all things. We each have a part to play in this drama, trusting in the Director that, however, these days may play out, they will end in truth and justice, in mercy and love.

Happily ever after. Roll credits.