

So-Called Gods, a sermon in response to Mark 1:21-28, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, and Deuteronomy 18:15-20, by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, January 21, 2024.

What is happiness? It depends on whom you ask. For Don Draper, **happiness** is something that can sell anything. Draper is the main character of the TV drama called “Mad Men,” which took place throughout the decade of the 60’s. He’s a cynical advertising executive with a knack for boiling anything down to its marketable essence – and subtly manipulating the buying public to respond as he desires. He dismisses real, wholesome, intrinsic human values. And that shows in **his** definition of “happiness:” “You know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It’s freedom from fear. It’s a billboard on the side of the road that *screams reassurance* that whatever **you** are doing is okay. **You** are okay.” +++ Draper is so good at what he does because he instantly recognizes our idols – or, as Paul calls them, our **SO-CALLED GODS** – Draper recognizes them and then uses them to his advantage. +++ What about love? Well, first of all, he knows that when we think about love, we aren’t really thinking about the **agape** love we see in our Holy Scriptures. No – and it’s an easy step to move us from “love” to “lust” – **and that sells**. “What you call ‘love,’” he says, “was invented by guys like me... to sell nylons.” +++ **Happiness... and Love... reduced to a cynical sales pitch**. +++ And, it’s not just Mad Men, of course. It’s also not just a fiction. ... Remember those Wrangler commercials with Brett Favre playing pick-up football with his buddies? Well, for men in my demographic – that made you think: “Yeah, that could be me... Cool... Athletic... Hanging out.” Ready, in fact, for the Faustian compromise – “I’d give up **everything** to be like that – but, hey, maybe all I have to do is buy me some Wranglers...” +++ +++ Or beer commercials: If you drink Corona, you’ll be ready to hang out at the beach with all the **other** beautiful people. +++ +++ Ads, TV shows, movies, social media... it seems like everything we encounter anymore tells us we’re not good enough as we **are** – we need to latch on new ways to fit in – to assert our individualism – to preserve our value. +++

Our so-called gods can take over our lives if we let them, can’t they? +++ +++ And even when we see through it – when you **don’t** go in for the hype, you might still contribute to it. Like, if I buy Wrangler jeans just because they’re on sale, or they fit me better – when other people see me wearing them it could still perpetuate the Brett Favre myth. If you drink Corona beer because it has a light flavor, and those thin bottles are easier to hold, it could still reinforce those TV ads for the people around you. +++ You could go **crazy** thinking about this stuff. And, I’m not saying you should stop using products that advertise (in fact, if you did, there’d be nothing left for you **to** use). +++ But we **should** be careful about reinforcing the would-be gods that are all around us, even if we don’t buy into them... because a lot of people do... and sometimes they take them very seriously. +++ And, **you and I both know** this goes **much** deeper than products and advertising... If not, I wouldn’t be talking about it in a sermon... In our world today, we can’t even agree on what the **truth** is; who we **are** as a people; or what our core **values** should be. – Like how to balance personal **freedom** with social **responsibility**, for example. Just because I **can** do something doesn’t mean I **should**. You’ve got to be careful, don’t you? ... We each have our own set of would-be gods – we all have different sensibilities – different vulnerabilities – different boundaries. And part of **loving each other** – part of **living out the gospel in our lives** – of being our **best selves for each other** is to **respect** those differences – and **to focus on what we all SHARE**, which is the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

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In today’s epistle reading, this is precisely what Paul is trying to tell the church of Corinth, which is in the middle of several nasty disputes. They are much more aware of what’s dividing them than what’s holding them together. That sounds familiar to any American these days, I think – being more aware of what divides us than what holds us together. +++ Corinth is a very busy and diverse city and the church reflects that diversity. There are people in the church with both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. There are successful businesspeople and politicians, and there are also church members **who grew up worshipping the pagan gods**. +++ **At that time**, it was *still* very common for animals to be sacrificed to idols in pagan ceremonies – so common that the leftover meat could pop up *anywhere*. >>> If you are invited to have dinner at a non-Christian friend’s house, – there’s a good chance you’ll be served meat that was part of a sacrifice. If you buy food at the local markets – same thing. It is *impossible* to be sure that none of the meat you eat came from a sacrifice. The only way to stay away from it is to turn down the invitations, sever ties in the community, and become isolated – producing all of your own food... OR, stop eating meat altogether. +++ Well, **some** church members think **that’s exactly** what they should do. – To remain **pure** for

Christ, they reason, Christians should stay away from pagan influences and food that has been “desecrated” by sacrificial rites... Other church members, on the other hand, – the more sophisticated ones with a high profile in the community – scoff at that idea. “**Why** should we avoid eating it? There is only **one** God. So, we **know** those idols have **no real power**. What difference does it make how the animals were **butchered**? **I should have the religious freedom to do what I want.**” +++ +++ **They are talking past each other, and they’re not sensitive to each other’s feelings.** The meat eaters look down on the ones who think the meat should be avoided. They call them superstitious and silly. +++ +++ **And so, now** they’ve sent a letter to Paul to settle it, asking – “Is it OK to eat food that’s been sacrificed to idols: Yes or No?!!?” +++ And Paul’s answer? >>> +++ **“You are asking the wrong question.”** +++ The problem isn’t the meat. – The problem is **YOU**. +++ For Paul, insisting on the freedom to eat meat served to idols, even at the expense of fellow Christians’ faith, is passive acceptance of **our own** false gods. **Personal Freedom** is a lot like the leftover sacrificial meat. There’s nothing intrinsically wrong with it – but taken selfishly, without regard for its effect on others, it becomes a stumbling block. +++ So, Paul’s answer, which we see in today’s text is: **Yes, you’re absolutely right**, – the food has no special power because there **ARE** no gods but the One true God. As you say, “Food will not bring us close to God” one way or the other. **OK, *** YOU *** have that knowledge**... Good for **you**. BUT “**knowledge puffs up**, while **LOVE builds up**.” +++ Your sisters and brothers have **worshipped** idols their *whole lives* until now – you can’t expect them to just ignore it like you do. If they see you eating the meat, they might conclude, “Maybe it *doesn’t matter* after all if Christians also worship the old gods,” and then they will eat the food also – even though they believe it’s wrong. +++ And it’s all because you are *puffed up* with your own knowledge – telling those who are weaker than you they are being stupid – telling them they are wrong – instead of **loving** them. +++ “I will **never** eat meat,” Paul writes, if it might cause one person to falter, because **I love them**. – For their sake, I’ll gladly **relinquish my freedom** to eat whatever I want.

THAT is the key to all of 1 Corinthians. **Why** should we take it upon ourselves to tell other Christians what they should and shouldn’t do when all it does is **hurt** them? – **Why** selfishly protect *our own* religious freedoms at other people’s expense?... **The key is LOVE**. – It’s about WHAT WE **DO FOR EACH OTHER BECAUSE WE LOVE**. +++ The **POWER OF LOVE**. +++ Chapter 13 is a famous treatise on LOVE: “Love is patient; love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way...” ... People use it in weddings all the time – but it’s not about romantic love. It’s about the *agape* love that can hold us together in unity. – It’s a kind of love that Don Draper could never understand, and that’s the heart wrenching tragedy of his character. +++ – We are all different. – Part of **loving each other**, – of **demonstrating the gospel in our lives**, – of being our **best selves for each other**, is to **focus on what we all SHARE instead of what divides us**. +++ And, the final passage of the book includes the command, “Let all that you do be done in love.” +++ **THAT’S** how to be like Christ, Paul tells us... **Not in words – but by action** – by the POWER OF LOVE.

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We find the same truth in our Old Testament reading, – when Israel is told to expect a future Prophet Like Moses who will wield the authority and power of God. +++ Moses was a man of **action** – yes, he spoke on God’s behalf when he was commanded to – but, by his own admission at the Burning Bush, he had never been eloquent. – He was “slow of speech and slow of tongue.” +++ Moses’ greatest achievements were what he **DID – out of love for God and love for his people**. – It was **not** what he *said*. Moses **rescued** a Hebrew slave from abuse. He **stood up** to Pharaoh. He **led** Israel out of bondage, across the sea, and then through the wilderness for 40 years. He received God’s Law directly from the Almighty and delivered it to Israel. +++ Yes, the Prophet-Like-Moses will speak with the authority of God, – but to understand what he’s all about, – **to learn how to follow him**, – we’ll need to do more than **listen** to his words. – We’ll have to **watch what he DOES**... Moses never stops listening for God’s Word to guide his life. – He never compromises with would-be gods. – And he never relents..., leading God’s People where they are called to go.

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In the New Testament, we learn that the long-awaited Prophet Like Moses is Jesus Christ. – He’s that mysterious man who appeared from the wilderness that we’ve been investigating these past few weeks. What have we learned so far? At his baptism, we discovered that **Jesus is the divine Son of God**, bound up with the Father and the Holy Spirit since Creation. We learned that he **will be a radical troublemaker** – a threat to both religious and political authorities. **We learned** that through baptism in Christ, **we** receive the **free gift** of the Holy Spirit working in our

own lives. And then, in the first words Jesus spoke, we learned that his arrival ushers in the kingdom of God: – he has **changed the world forever**. That’s all the first disciples needed to hear, – They followed him without knowing anything else about him. +++ **All that, and we’re still in chapter 1.** +++ Now... *today*... we already begin to see those changes unfold, as Jesus enters a synagogue for the first time since his ministry began. Mark tells us Jesus teaches *with such authority* that everyone is **astounded**. +++ But first of all, we shouldn’t miss the irony that this kind of speaking is something **new** in the synagogue: “For he taught them as one having authority, and **not as the scribes**.” They weren’t used to holy men speaking with authority. +++ And then, this man under the power of an unclean spirit cries out, **offended** at what Jesus is saying. Jesus hasn’t even looked his way yet – like he hadn’t even noticed the guy. +++ Until Jesus came along, I guess the temple had been a nice safe, comfortable place for this **unclean spirit**... and it had been kind of spoiled by the lack of authority and weak leadership of the scribes. It was **so** comfortable, in fact, that it’s the **unclean spirit** who speaks up to confront **Jesus** about being in the synagogue **instead of the other way around**. That’s kind backwards, isn’t it? “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? **I know who you are**, the Holy One of God.” ... +++ ... “What have you to do with **US**?” +++ I know unclean spirits often refer to themselves in the plural in the New Testament – but the way this comes out: “What have you to do with **us**, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” It sounds like the spirit is talking about himself, the scribes, and *everyone else* present there that day. “**What have you got to do with us?**” +++ I think it’s a serious question. “This is **our** synagogue; **you** aren’t welcome here!” +++ And when Jesus rebukes the spirit – and drives it out – everyone is **amazed again!** +++ ||| +++ “**What is this? A new teaching????!?!???**” +++ ||| +++ **Everything is Topsy-Turvey in God’s house**. An unclean spirit feels right at home there. The “Holy One of God” is the one being challenged about whether he has any business being there. +++ Even in the house of God... +++ – ... **even in the Church**, +++ ... Mark reminds us, if we don’t keep our focus squarely on the extravagant love and the teachings of Christ, – on the **authority** of Christ, – we can easily devolve into... >>> something **else**... Something guided by **own** priorities – our **own** power structure – our **own** desires – our **own** prejudices... Devolve with our own SO-CALLED gods **to the point where we’re threatened** when the **real** authority of Christ arrives on the scene to set things right again.

+++ We have so many so-called gods at work today, commanding our devotion and our time while Bibles gather dust upon the shelf: the god of power... at the expense of basic decency...; +++ the god of so-called of “family values” that validates controlling people’s bodies and their love...; +++ the god of naïve nationalism that has us looking inward while the world melts..., starves..., and self-destructs around us...; +++ +++ the god that reframes *agape* love for neighbors as somehow quaint..., unproductive... – and even dangerous.

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My friends, as we make our way verse-by-verse through this opening chapter of Mark – so rich, like poetry, that every word speaks volumes – the Holy Spirit reminds us of the **true nature of God in Jesus Christ**. +++ He teaches us, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians – **the nature of God is the active... Power... of Love**. +++ It’s a power we can tap into – to **build each other up** instead of **puffing up ourselves**. +++ +++ **TODAY** – among Christians everywhere, I think **WE** do a lot of *puffing up* just like the Corinthians with their sophisticated knowledge: Whenever **we** use **our own** understanding of the scriptures to decide how *others* should act... “THIS should be illegal because **I think** it’s a sin”... “**I** shouldn’t have to deal with THAT customer because of **my** sincerely-held religious beliefs.” “**THOSE people** clearly don’t understand what the gospel is all about – and they refuse to listen **to me** explain it to them”... “We don’t **have** to treat THIS person with respect – they shouldn’t even be in our country”... +++ **“Is it OK to eat food sacrificed to idols: Yes or No?!!?”** +++ When we do that, “**We** are asking the wrong question.” +++ **The problem isn’t the meat – the problem is US. The problem is our SO-CALLED GODS, each of us with our own, which distract us from the words of Jesus Christ who is still teaching in our midst. Our so-called gods, which puff us up and make us mutter under our breath: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth!”** +++ This morning, I wonder – what would you say are your so-called Gods? It doesn’t have to be dramatic – most are something mundane like the so-called gods the leftover sacrificial meat had been offered to. Like the craving for admiration? An obsession with how you appear on social media? Defining yourself – your personal worth – by your financial stability or your “stuff?” Maybe you obsess and judge yourself over your personal appearance? Or maybe, like the sophisticated Christians whom Paul addresses today, you’re puffed up by your knowledge and look down on “less-cultivated folk.” These are just a few possible

examples of the small, every-day, *so-called gods* that creep into our lives and distract us from the One we're called to serve. +++ Maybe after this service – later in the day – you can take some time to think, and pray, about *your* so-called gods, and how you might tweak your priorities to put them in their proper place.

THE GOOD NEWS is: Jesus shows us how! He shows up in our synagogues that have drifted from his Word – where our unclean spirits and idols have grown too comfortable of late. – He shows up where our Would-Be gods are grown and nurtured by the cynicism of this modern world. +++ Jesus shows up and he challenges us with authority, wielding the Power of God in the name of Love. – And by returning to him – by listening to authority of his Word, Christ shows you how to leave your so-called gods behind. – Then you're free! You're free to follow in his ways: to serve the most vulnerable without hesitation or regret, as Jesus did. – You're free to put your own freedoms to the side for the good of suffering neighbors. – You're free to listen with open ears to those in our nation with whom you disagree, to see them with open eyes, and to love them with a forgiving heart. – We're free to heal the divide among Christians by remembering what lies at the core of our faith, then celebrate our unity in Christ. +++ +++ With the power of love and the authority of Jesus Christ, we truly can “let all that we do be done in love,” free from the tyranny of our so-called gods

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.