

Shiny gods - 2

Leviticus 19: 9-10 When you harvest your land's produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don't gather up every remaining bit of your harvest. Also do not pick your vineyard clean or gather up all the grapes that have fallen there.

Matthew 6:19-21 "Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them.

Acts 4:32-35 The community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, "This is mine!" about any of their possessions, but held everything in common. The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all. There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, ³⁵ and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need.

Shiny gods - 2

Last week we paused to look back and remember where this congregation was four years ago. We were discouraged and dwindling. We were looking at a clear trend that could only end in closing the doors of this church. But we came to the realization that if **we** changed, the **future** could change. We changed our **self-image** - and decided that we would be a **new church start**. We would think of ourselves as a **new** congregation that was already blessed with a building. We changed our attitude, we changed how we worshipped, we changed what we sang and what we studied and what we looked like.

We began to grow in number and we began to see more young families among us. That's worth celebrating! We've got a winning streak going! But it's a winning streak, not the division championship or the World Series.

Proverbs 29:18a says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." We've had the vision that we were a new church start. That vision will only take us so far before we stall and decline. It's time to **expand** our vision for this church.

There are lots of churches in Thomasville that preach a message of fear: "You are one nasty mess of sin and if a bus hits you on the way home, God is going to fry you like a hush puppy."

There are lots of places you can go on Sunday morning to be entertained and swept into a mild euphoria by a sugary message.

There are lots of churches that will tell you that everybody else is doomed because they aren't like us. That's comforting, but it can lead to pride and laziness on our part - and seeing others who aren't like us as degenerates and worthless.

But First Pres isn't called by God to be one more cookie cutter church. We are called to have a **different** vision. We are called to be a place where all generations are welcome, a place where old and new music exist side by side, a place where children are welcomed, not pushed aside. Our vision is a church where there are many right ways to worship, where questions are encouraged, not condemned, where God's love and mercy are celebrated and people respond in gratitude. God calls us, not to go **to** church, but to **be the church**, the body of Christ, loving our neighbors, rather than fearing them.

Let me be more specific. Close your eyes for a moment and see this vision for the future of First Pres. See a congregation of 150 disciples, a congregation that will **again** send gleaners

into the fields to harvest produce for the food pantries, a congregation that will again sponsor and build a Habitat for Humanity home. Envision two adult classes on Sunday mornings. See the Parents of Young Children on retreat. Back in September they found the church-wide retreat so inspiring that they'd also like to have a retreat focused especially on the issues they face as parents in today's culture. Picture a youth program that extends beyond Sunday morning – because POYC is brainstorming about making that a reality.

This vision doesn't automatically happen. We can be sidetracked by shiny gods, idols that divert our attention, blur our focus, and turn our heads. We all have our idols, things to which we devote too much time, too much energy, and too much money. We think that they give our life meaning, but they really don't do that very well.

There are all kinds of idols. I call them shiny gods because we're attracted to things that glitter and gleam. We can become obsessed with anything that begins with "i" – iPod, iPad, iPhone. Other things gleam and glitter – nooks, kindles, HDTV, and video games. These aren't bad things at all. But you can find yourself in bondage to them. They can swallow up lots of time - and generate lots of debt.

Not all idols are shiny. Other possible idols are food, sex, clothes, cars, sports teams, entertainment, alcohol, career advancement, the house, the landscaping, and on and on the list goes. Our idols can be hard to detect - and easy to rationalize. What do you worship? Look at your calendar. What gets your time and attention? We worship God one hour a week and think that's sufficient commitment, while worshiping our shiny idols many more hours.

Look at your bank statement and your credit card statement. We focus a lot of time, energy, and money on wanting, having, and achieving. God would have us devote ourselves to loving – loving our neighbor as our self.

We all have our idols. I've almost given up on sports cars. I confess that it isn't because I don't want one anymore. I chased career advancement for years, thinking that getting patents would make me respected, increase my salary, and give my life more meaning. I learned the hard way that those idols weren't worthy of worship. I confess that books are still an idol. I keep many that I don't need - and I buy more than I can find time to read.

There are lots of places that are tightly focused on believing the right things. You've probably been led to believe that as you reach the pearly gates, the first question you'll be asked is whether you believe that Jesus is your Lord and Savior. But in the picture that Jesus paints of the Day of Judgment in Matthew 25, the question will be, "Did you feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and take care of the sick?" Those actions require that you give of your money, your time, and your abilities. Are you just a believer – or are you committed to a relationship with God? It's awfully easy to worship the gifts we've been given - instead of the giver who is the source. Every Sunday we sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." The words are significant if we haven't let ourselves become calloused to them.

I almost asked you to take your wallet out of your pocket or handbag and lay it on the pew next to you. You see, we believe, our minds have heard God's call. But because we sit on our wallet or bury it in a dark handbag, I not sure that our wallet has been converted! As you lay out the family budget, is your offering listed at the top or the bottom? Is your offering even on the list? Do you check your pocket toward the end of the service to see what's left? Are you offering God the leftovers? Don't toss your leftovers in the offering plate. It isn't a doggie bag!

It all comes down to this. Take a clear look at your calendar, your credit card statement, and your heart. Don't wrap yourself in a blanket of guilt. But, do be honest with yourself about where you find some shiny gods that could use less worship.

Without a vision, the people perish. So, embrace and empower the vision for the future of this church: A place where the faithful serve with joy and thanksgiving - rather huddle in fear that God will smite them for not being perfect. A place where living our faith is just as important as confessing what we believe. A place where a lifetime of spiritual growth is more important than having a few black and white answers. A house for saints and sinners, because each of us is both. A place where we sing "All are welcome" - and that's what people experience. A place where God's steadfast love flows into the community, filling bellies, warming the shivering, and illuminating all with the light that overcomes the darkness. I invite you to live into the vision of the not-too-distant future of First Pres. Amen!

Sisters and Brothers,
Remember the past and be grateful for the present.
Whether your field is large or small,
Whether your crop is bountiful or lean
In all circumstances, we must not keep it all for ourselves.
Instead, we must remember and share generously.