

Idolatry of Romantic Love Wesley 19 Feb 2017

Introduction

Leviticus 19: 4 “**Do not turn to idols** or make cast images for yourself; I am the lord your God.” This is one of a list of God’s ‘do not’s’. Some perhaps seem more relevant to us today, but making idols? The prophet **Isaiah mocked idolatry**, basically a man cuts down a tree, burns half to make bread and “the rest he makes into a god, his idol; and he falls down to it and worships it, he prays to it and says ‘Deliver me, for thou art my god’.” (Isa 44:7). We can smile about all this, we are children of the enlightenment and idols make even less sense to us than they did to the prophet Isaiah. We dismiss idolatry as primitive superstition or as a precursor to monotheism.

I looked around my office and thought I would bring in the closest thing I have to an idol. It is a **bronze statue of a dog**. Interestingly it is probably about the size as the golden calf that upset Moses in Exodus 32. It is similar to a clay idol of a calf that I saw in a museum in Israel. But I am misleading you towards an object - even one suggested by the reading. Centuries later in the New Testament there was a spiritual shift in the understanding of idolatry. St Paul said “There are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’” (I Cor 8:5). Theologian Thielecke observed, “Idolatry is an illusion but the god gets a grip on us!”

When we have ‘eyes to see’ we swim in an ocean of idolatry. I believe idolatry is ubiquitous in modern life.

1. Case Study

How do we see more clearly? I propose taking a case study in idolatry. But first my favourite **cartoon from the 1980’s**. A temporary teacher is taking the roll, “Is Jody McNulty here?” “Yes, teacher.” “I had a Freedom McNulty yesterday.” “Yes that is my older sister.” Someone in the class asked “What kind of name is that?” The teacher answered, “Freedom was born in the 1960’s and her name reflects the values of that time.” Then a boy said, “Boy am I glad I wasn’t born then.” The teacher continued with the roll, “Megabucks McDermond here?”

Back to my case study, I want to use a less obvious example of idolatry than **money**. Though there is profound thought about the financial system in the Catholic Church and articulated by Pope Francis. I could use political ideology, ideas of beauty, or nationalism. The list is almost endless. The last time I preached a sermon I mentioned one of my idols was academic recognition. But today I will explore romantic love. Romantic love has been likened to the seraphim in Isaiah, “Each had six wings, with two he covered his face, two he covered his feet and with two he flew.” (Isa 6:2). How similar is this to the feeling of being in love: You don’t know where you are going, and you can’t see clearly who you are with, but oh do you fly!”

We are constantly bombarded with messages about **romantic love**. It is woven into our popular culture and reinforced by endless ‘feel good’ romantic films. So I let’s think together about a movie you have probably seen: **Pretty Woman (1990)**. It is the highest grossing romantic comedy of all time. There are frequent references to fairy tales, but that is just the icing on the cake, the substance is a strong message about the magic of romantic love.

The story in brief (just in case you were not one of the 42M who paid to see it or later caught it on TV or video). Richard **Gere** is a corporate pirate, buying vulnerable companies, stripping them of assets and making millions. He is so used to having a chauffeur that he can hardly drive a borrowed Lotus sports car. Julia **Roberts** is a sassy sex worker who he hires for the week he is in LA. What I find

interesting is what the chemistry of romantic love achieves. Basically Gere gets a *heart* and Roberts gets *class*. Being Hollywood all this is achieved without any apparent effort. In *My Fair Lady* Professor Higgins took months and all his skill to transform a flower girl into a princess. Roberts simply went on a shopping excursion down Rodeo Drive. *Pygmalion* quick and easy. More mythical than the original. So the message is: surrender to romantic love and it will instantly make you a better person. Rich, attractive, sophisticated, even a bit of saint. The curious thing is that this is so believable in our culture!

More interesting than the predictable transformation of Julia Roberts is the character **Richard Gere** plays. If recognizing human feelings and becoming compassionate is not enough of a transformation, he also becomes more psychologically healthy. In the movie he has a fear of heights. He cannot go out on the balcony of the hotel room, but at the end of the film he scales the fire-escape to Julia Roberts's apartment to bring a bouquet of roses to win his beloved. A phobia does not need therapy when you are in love!

2. Romantic Love in History

The Biblical understanding of love is not romantic. But that is another sermon. Our modern understanding of romantic love is a relatively recent 'invention'. It came out of **courtly love** in the late middle ages. It appealed to the aristocracy who were the only people who had the luxury of leisure. Most people were subsistence farmers and toiled all day, and at sunset would fall exhausted into bed. I am not ruling out sex but any thoughts of romance were unlikely.

The great romances were among the **elites**. This included the unrequited love of Dante for Beatrice, the relationship of theologian Abelard with the nun Heloise and troubadours sang the romance of Tristan, a fictional Cornish knight and the Irish princess Iseult. He was to bring her back for King Mark but in one version they both take a love potent with tragic results.

Allow me to take a 'cold look' at romantic love. Originally it was **associated with infidelity** not marriage. Marriage especially among the rich was for property reasons, sometimes among royalty for political alliances, so if a couple 'fell in love' it would have been unlikely that they were married. Later the renaissance brought back the classical Greek notion of individual rights. This led to a profound shift in the concept of marriage. People thought that they could decide their own destiny, which included the right to marry someone of their own choice. We see this shift in the plays of **Shakespeare**, who offered one of the earliest critiques of romantic love, "reason and love keep little company together nowadays: the more the pity that some honest neighbours will not make them friends". What we saw 500 years ago was the change in marriage from a socio-political institution to a psychological, even spiritual, one.

3. Path to Salvation

So why is all this a problem? What makes romantic love idolatry? It is the **expectation** that being in **love saves**. How many people have you heard say that they will only be happy when they find their 'soul mate'? Or only then will life have meaning. Or purpose. Too much is expected of love, it has become what Tillich called an "ultimate concern".

Now to be clear, I think **sexual attractiveness is a good thing**, it is celebrated in the Bible in Song of Songs. I like being romantic. On occasion I take flowers home to Shayleen, I think about gifts that celebrate special events, we go out to fine dining and share good bottles of wine, listen to music with violins and it is wonderful – it is just that I don't expect this love to save me. Or her. Or anyone.

The concept of idolatry is very **important for spiritual maturity**. In part the quest is to discern illusion from reality. This was also the point of Plato's allegory of the cave in his *Republic*. Prisoners are bound by chains, with a fire behind them and all they see are shadows cast on the wall. How do we distinguish what is a shadow on the wall and what is of substance?

The concept of idolatry helps us to understand that there is something terribly **wrong with the love formula**. It is shadows, not reality. The shadows include what psychologists call 'projection' seeing the beloved in the light of our needs. How we need the person to be. Of course, initially this feels wonderful. We believe the beloved is the 'bearer of all good gifts'. And we don't see our own neediness. We try to appear more 'together' than we are, less neurotic, less dominated by bad habits and more psychologically healthy. At some point in this unreality, a 'switch is thrown' and both people in the relationship become more relaxed, becoming their true selves. The 'smoke and mirrors' ends. And the problems begin. The difficulty is not that we are bad people or that love must end, it is a mistake of shadows for substance. It is idolatry. Ultimately what Tillich called "the ground of being", his expression for God, is traded for an idol. The result is a crisis in relationships. As a **couple therapist**, I have spent thousands of clinical hours with distressed couples, I have seen the emotional destruction of romantic love. For years I was an expert to the family court, where I assessed the damage of unresolved conflict on children.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most sobering thought I can leave with you is the following: How much disappointment in committed relationships is because of unrealistic expectations that no human love could possibly deliver? I have looked at romantic love as a spiritual case study in idolatry. I could have used **metaphors** of counterfeit money or pursuing 'fool's gold.' But you get the point. It is up to us, guided by the Spirit of God, to discern what is real. When we get it wrong we must end up disappointed, unhappy and despairing - that is just the way things are. The spiritual journey is towards God, the divine source of everything of any substance.

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