

No Real Existence

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“...as to eating food which was sacrificed to idols, we know that idols have no real existence and that there is no God but the One, true God.” — 1 Corinthians 8:4.

At the start of my meditation two weeks ago I spoke about being a pastor in a small, rural, five church cooperative in the State of Maine. Last week at the start I addressed how people use Facebook. The place I start today combines the two.

I am a member in a number of clergy groups on Facebook. Recently a discussion broke out on one of those pages about pledges and budgets in small, rural churches.

Making pledges in thousands and thousands of small, rural churches is not a common practice. Indeed, the year before I arrived at the Waldo County Cooperative was the first time any of the five churches employed pledges. For many of us sitting here today that would raise an obvious question: ‘how can you possibly make a fiscal plan without pledges?’

This would be the answer you’d get from anyone in small, rural churches. ‘We plan. But make a pledge? If you make a pledge you do not trust God.’

For people in small, rural churches this is cut and dry: make a pledge and you are entertaining false gods since you don’t believe God will provide. You are, effectively, saying false gods are real; the One, true God is not. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in First Corinthians: “...as to eating food which was sacrificed to idols, we know that idols have no real existence and that there is no God but the One, true God.” (Slight pause.)

As you know here, in this church, we both make pledges and have a considerable endowment that helps support us. Pledges, even having an endowment— these *are* about making plans... if you treat them that way.

Making plans is something any business would do. And we are in a business, the business called church. For any business, even the business called church, to not plan *could* be seen as less than prudent.

But that fact also leads to an obvious question: in this church, among this group of the people of God, what is our most important asset? Is it that we pledge? Is it that there’s an endowment? Is it that we budget? After all, these can all be considered assets and they are simply a part of planning. And planning— that’s just a part of business!

So, what are our most important assets? (Long pause.) I want to suggest Scripture (the pastor holds up a Bible) and the assets commonly called freedom, justice, peace, hope and love as God sees these and which are found therein— these are our most important asset. I also want to suggest our second most important asset is you, this congregation here gathered, the people of God. (Short pause.)

To say *anything less* than the ideas of freedom, justice, peace, hope and love as God sees these *and* our people are our most important assets is to write off what Paul says about false gods as poppycock. Indeed, *that* is what people in small, rural churches are getting at when they insist if you make a pledge you don’t trust God. They are saying we, members of these small, rural churches, *will not* set up false gods.

Again and to be clear, I do not recommend we fail to pledge, I fully appreciate the support of the endowment and it is prudent to budget because preparing a budget means we are simply making a plan. But that plan is a simply that: a plan. It is *not* a god. So what am I saying is if pledging, the endowment and making a budget are not seen as our most important assets? These are indeed false gods. That's what I'm saying.

So as we consider the budget today, let us we remember what we need to understand as a church. *We are* engaged in a business—the business of sharing the freedom, justice, peace, hope and the love of God. In fact, as would be true of any business, we have a client.

That client, our client, our only client is the same client of Whom Paul speaks—the One true God, the living God, the Triune God. And since God is our client, our most important assets *are* the freedom, justice, peace, hope and the love of God found in Scripture *and* our people. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “The first words I said today suggested it’s inappropriate to separate worship and work, business and the Word, a heresy rejected by the church sixteen hundred years ago. Indeed, we need to see the world through eyes of faith. And the first thing that changes when the world through eyes of faith is our world view. When we see things with eyes of faith business is seen in a different light. And so yes, we are a business. And God is our client. And we are assets and because the world is seen through eyes of faith and we the asset which sees the world through eyes of faith, we are empowered to share the assets called freedom, justice, peace, hope and the love of God as found here (the pastor again holds up a Bible) in Scripture.”

BENEDICTION: People of light, turn toward God with joy and be free and open to the empowerment God offers. People of unity, be one in Christ. People of commitment, dare to run the race with courage. May the Spirit dwell with us and may the peace of Christ, which surpasses our understanding keep our hearts, minds and spirits centered on God, this day and forevermore. Amen.

[1] At the start of the service, during the announcements, this was said: “As has been our practice for some time now, we will be engaged in what is commonly termed worshipful work, as we will both worship and have that meeting. Our by-laws state each service of worship is a meeting of the church, which is directly in line with our Congregational polity. Hence, the only difference this week is we will do what some of what might loosely call business along within the worship. To draw the real comparison, some might call worship of God our real business. However, a belief that the two— worship and work, business and the Word— can be separated, is a heresy rejected by the church about sixteen hundred years ago. Rumor to the contrary, our Christian heritage makes the claim that there is no such thing as secular and sacred. It is all one piece.”