



John August Swanson, Entry Into the City, 1990.

## Greetings!



Richardson, Jan. Ash Wednesday Cross

Please read

[Matthew 21: 1-11](#)

[Mark 11: 1-11](#)

[Luke 19: 28-44](#)

[John 12: 12-19](#)

Years ago my cousin Ryan, who grew up overseas as a missionary kid asked me, “Are you and idol worshipper?” I am about 15 years older than my cousin and at the time was getting ready to go to college, I replied smartly, “Well it depends on how you spell the word.” Now my cousin was not even school aged, and I was

being a smart aleck, but I like that story because in our idolatry we can become “idle” worshipers of the Almighty God!

Recently in my [morning devotions](#), I came across this reading:

*“The starting point for... imagination is an amazing, positive experience of God”. Their divine encounter fills their heart not with cynicism, not with sarcasm, not with negativity, not with opposition, but with an ecstasy that has to be shared...”*

But what is this imagination and how does it connect with the Lenten Discipline? Imagination becomes real for me in relationships. The primary relationship is with the Holy - that moment on a retreat in the stillness of the mountains, or at the

beach watching the sun rise or set, perhaps in listening to great music, or as I am now, listening to the birds and observing them build their nests. As all of these things point to the constant cycle that we call the circle of life, I find God. In these moments, the “amazing, positive experience of God” dissolves my real and perceived troubles.

The troubles perceived or real are most often the work of idols or my belief in them. Idols are useless and fall by the wayside and pale in comparison to the awesome wonder of God. Jesus had this sense and was keen about it, more than any of us could imagine.

In his ministry, Jesus frequently shattered idols. The great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich, aptly named these idols **illusions**. Tillich called out these illusions in his great book, The Courage to Be. Illusions are idols of self-protection that keep us from getting hurt. They are security blankets, if you will, that are more about us than about the Holy. God in Jesus Christ shatters illusions and through the work of the cross replaces our idolatry of self-protection with a life that is lived on behalf of others.

The Church has always struggled with idolatry and has spent much of its existence in self-preservation and illusion making. The Church is of God, to me there is no doubt, however, the Church is run by humans. And we humans like our illusions. We like our idols. In seasons of duress, the Church has been a prize to be won, not a vehicle of self-sacrifice and Kingdom bringing. In fact, sometimes quite the opposite, the Church has become intransigent, has blocked change and failed to embrace the neighbor. In many instances the Church has not heard the cries of the needy, has forgotten about justice, has been misogynist, racist, and exclusive to anyone who is not straight, of the dominant culture and often in particular, male. This is an apt definition of idolatry. We have failed to embrace the creative power of God.

In my work, we have churches that claim to be welcoming places, but then have a secret code to “really get in” and be accepted – idolatry! We have churches that say, “we want to grow” but miss seeing their neighbors all around the physical church building – idolatry. Worship is dead as a doornail in so many places, but dead worship is a “valued tradition here” – idolatry! Politics has always been a part of the Church and now with the advent of QAnon has taken over so many congregations. It has become the agenda instead of Kingdom building and soul saving – idolatry!

“Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore!” [1]

Idolatry is no stranger to the text cited in today’s devotion. Sunday is Palm Sunday and the text describes a procession. That procession could be seen as a protest rally. In that procession is the notion of the Messiah as political fulfillment over the oppressor Rome. This comes into conflict when the Kingdom that Jesus is promoting is a Kingdom of nonviolence, justice and the fulfillment of spiritual disciplines like worship, silence, contemplation, study of the scripture that has incredible outputs of relationship, word and action. Jesus’ example is that the output of preaching, teaching and healing comes from building up the interior life. By his example, seeing the Kingdom in a spiritual context is key to avoiding the pitfalls of temporal illusion making. In essence, the Palm Sunday procession is a destruction of the idols that politics, military might, and revolution will save us. Vanquishing an external enemy

will surely not save you - especially if the battle is from within. When I give in to idolatry the fix is temporary, but when I choose the way of God, it is eternal.

If you haven't read the book [The Last Week \[2\]](#) by Borg and Crossan, you really should. In the text you can see this play out in all the events of Jesus' last week. The last week of Jesus' life is a pitched battle of self-preservation, politics, posturing – all temporary fixes. The players keep missing the wholeness and the holiness that Jesus offers in the Kingdom of God.

Are you still missing it? Are you an idol/idle worshipper?

### **Humble Palm Sunday Congregational Prayer**

Holy Jesus,

you come to meet us in humble ways.

You meet us in the lengthening of the light.

You meet us in the fragrance of the earth, melting.

You meet us in the delicate petals of the first yellow crocus blossom.

You meet us in the first bee we see.

This year we will look for little signs of life, not passing them by,  
but stopping and giving thanks for your presence in the beauty of our world.

Your holy presence is all around us.

Thank you for this congregation gathered to worship,  
and for the way you have shaped us into a loving supportive community  
reaching out to those in need.

Thank you for showing us the joy of losing ourselves and finding your strength.

We need strength this week to love our families,

to be kind at work even when we are tired,

and to give to our community, even when we feel we have nothing to give.

We come to you in humility because we are not a perfect people.

We know what's right and we would like to do it,

but we feel that road is too hard, and too costly.

Forgive us for cheering you on your lonely road while we take the easy way.

We love a humble Saviour riding a donkey,

but we want the best things, and honour without responsibility.

Today we pray for all who are tempted by power:

for our political leaders with many followers who will do anything to stay popular;

for those with great financial resources, who only want to use it for themselves;

for those with power over vulnerable people, who hurt those in their care.

You know how each one of us is being tempted in our own life:

In this moment of silence we meet you at our own crossroads,

we feel your great tender love for us and listen to your voice....[Silence]

Thank you that you don't just show us the way,

you are the way, and you empower us to follow you.

We follow you together, with hosannas in our hearts.

In Jesus' holy name we pray, Amen. [3]

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[1] Henry Emmerson Fosdick, *God of Grace and God of Glory*, Hymn #577 The UM Hymnal, Nashville, TN, 1989.

[2] John Dominic Crossan and Marcus J. Borg, [The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus Final Days in Jerusalem](#), Harper Collins, NY, 2006.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Todd".

Rev. Dr. Todd D. Anderson, West Ohio Superintendent  
Ohio River Valley District, United Methodist Church

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