

It's lonely at the top.

*Besides me there is no god*, says the One and only, which is the hallmark confession of Judaism and its religious kin, including us Christians.

The Jews repeat this over and over again in the Shema from Deuteronomy: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one*, presumably because Israel needs to keep hearing it, probably because human nature is so very prone to forget it.

We are no better than they are at remembering this, and likely worse, given our operational pantheon of idols.

Our idols tend not to be hand-carved figurines but realities in the virtual vapor of the internet or the heart: the bank balance, the thrill, productivity, sex, ambition, power, work, human relationships (either face to face or on Facebook, either family or friends), comfort, reputation, addiction, escape, health, happiness, security, propriety, anything and everything, most of it noble and good, that we prioritize over God.

Perhaps you can add to the list; perhaps whatever is distracting your thoughts right now as the sermon trails off into background noise is really more important to you than the real God, at least at the moment.

You can always resolve or reshuffle or reorder things later, when you get around to it, because after all, you gather the wood and sculpt the statue; you are the one who makes the decisions, the schedule, the budget.

You are the one in charge of your own life, because you are the real idol, you are the divine pretender *par excellence*.

You and I, each and all of us, buoyed and bolstered by an American society that worships the independent individual while bowing to the almighty dollar, we all to one degree or another trip into the trap of self-promotion to the throne of God.

It may only be a tiny rowboat, but I'm the captain of my own ship.

I will find a way to exercise my will over the waves and the weather and the resistance I do not yet control.

I will find a way to be God, no matter how small the universe I rule or how long it takes me to master it.

*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*

*I AM he first and I AM the last; besides me there is no god*, says a voice other than the familiar one in our head.

It is a difficult voice to trust, since God doesn't fulfill the role of God the way we would.

This is the conundrum of the cross, and it is also the problem of the servants in Jesus' gospel story.

They are as ready to weed the compromised field as are the rest of us.

They are chomping at the righteous bit to uproot the bad in order to protect the good.

Ah, but which is which?

The national debt stalemate drama we are currently watching is just one more illustration of this ageless problem.

On the expense side of the budget, what is wheat, and what is weed?

What should be rooted out: benefits to seniors, military spending, bank bailouts, worker pensions, tax breaks, infrastructure, Medicare, Social Security?

Are these things good or bad for our society, necessary or non-essential, a priority or a problem?

On the income side, does increasing revenue by raising taxes improve or worsen our situation: short term or long term, and who should get taxed how much?

What is fair, what is just, and what is the right balance for the overall health of the economy that we all agree is more important than any other god?

At the heart of the debate is the maddening truth that the field is a tangled and intertwined mess that we cannot manage to separate and sort without doing real and lasting damage.

Whatever the specific outcome of the debt ceiling fight, no matter how prudent it is, something good will be destroyed, and something evil will flourish.

And we can't agree on what is wheat and what is weed, and there's a reason for that.

In Jesus' story, the weed that the enemy sows is *zizania* in Greek, *lolium temulentum* in botanical Latin, a kind of field grass that looks exactly like wheat.

This gets interspersed with the wheat and the roots get tangled together, and by now no doubt the field is now littered with hybrids too, like policies that are both wise and foolish, helpful and detrimental, crafted by leaders who are both saints and sinners, who are both champions of their constituencies and beholden to their benefactors, public servants who are both principled and ambitious, wheat and weed together in the very same voice.

How will we ever untangle, separate, and sort out the mess that is our life in this world?

God says we won't.

Every instinct we have tells us that Jesus' story is a paradigm of bad farming.

We know that it is terrible gardening to forgive the weeds growing among the wheat.

This approach makes absolutely no sense to us.

And God nods God's head and says, *you're right.*

*It makes no sense to you.*

*You don't understand it at all.*

*Which is why you are not in charge of the farm, and why you should keep your hands off the impossibly tricky task of personal judgment and leave that to me.*

*I AM he first and I AM the last; besides me there is no god, not even you.*

Which is why the first commandment, the very first one, is *you shall have no other gods before me.*

We may bristle at this, but it is ultimately good news for us, freeing us of the impossible burden of having to be God ourselves.

We don't much like the repercussions of this commandment, the heavy obedience it calls for.

We are often reluctant to give the first ten percent of our income back to God or even the first hour of the week.

Muslims pray five times a day, times that change every day because they depend on the heavens and not on the agendas of earth, and we wonder at such discipline before dismissing it as unrealistic rather than learning from it as a great way to remember who isn't God.

The fact is, daily prayer and study, weekly worship and regular offering, acts of service and advocacy for justice, all the disciplines of our faith that we take or leave cafeteria style depending on what our other idols have written into our Blackberry for us, seem to us to be way too much for God to ask while what those other idols demand from us go unquestioned and quietly continue to overwhelm and under-nourish us.

The blessings we claim as freedoms end up enslaving us, while the order to put God first actually sets us free.

Free from the stress and pressure of trying and failing to be God or to serve other idols as their unwitting slaves, permitting God to be first liberates us and finally establishes the order we so desperately wish we could impose on the weed-infested world.

Our presiding bishop Mark Hanson, in his monthly column for the Lutheran magazine, explores this freedom beautifully.

He writes,

*Slavery to sin, the bondage of serving idolatrous gods (including oneself), and captivity to the powers of evil and death are humankind's real problem.*

*Some experience this slavery as a greedy, consumptive preoccupation with oneself--being turned in on oneself.*

*Others experience this bondage as being trapped by lesser demands--social status and expectations, career progress and affluence, and personal and family schedules.*

*This servitude leads to neglect one's primary relationship to God and a confident life in that relationship.*

*Slavery, bondage, and captivity, however, are not our destiny.*

*In Christ God promises freedom....*

*This serving freedom liberates us from self-centeredness and self-neglect....*

*This freedom does not return us to sin's captivity but liberates us for lives of generous, loving service.*

*As German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "Freedom is not a presence, a possession, an object; it is a relationship and nothing else."*

In that relationship, Paul explains, we are not slaves--or employees, or plaintiffs, or subjects or citizens or customers or clients.

We are children of God, and so are the others planted around us, weed and wheat alike, the ones that look like us and the ones that don't, the ones we identify as good and the ones we are sure need to be taken out.

We don't get to sort or separate, thanks be to God, because we are not qualified to distinguish.

There is too much we do not know, about our neighbor, about ourselves, about the wider field, the bigger picture, the world God plants and the enemy terrorizes with imitation.

*I AM he first and I AM the last; besides me there is no god, says the voice that also says this: Do not fear, or be afraid.*

I know exactly who and what you are, saint and sinner, weed and wheat, hybrid of faith and idolatry.

You are my beloved child.

I sculpted you, and I love you, I hold you in my hand, and in my good time and in my wise way, I will make you shine.