

He walked into the temple a respected man. Sure, there were some who had a problem with him, some he had rubbed the wrong way, some who were a bit skeptical, but for the most part he walked into the temple a respected man. When he preached a sermon you could hear a pin drop in the room as people waited on a baited breath for the next words to flow from his mouth. Something about the way that he spoke and the things he had to say set him head and shoulders above the other teachers of his time.

And then there were the miracles. I don't care how skeptical you were of his message, when you saw the never ending stream of sick, blind, lame, demon-possessed flocking toward him with their ailments on full display and then saw those same people running, skipping, and jumping away from him singing his praises, fully healed, this man inspired awe. Add in the whispered rumors of walking on water, the 5000 families who wouldn't stop talking about being fed on a hillside, and it was easy to see how this man held an audience. It was easy to respect a man like that.

He walked into the temple a respected man, but by the end of the day he would leave, sneaking out the back because the respect was gone – gone to the tune of a mob yelling, shouting, fully intent on pelting him with stones until he stopped breathing.

What changed? What could Jesus possibly have said that would be so offensive, so repulsive that the same crowd that used to believe in him, the same crowd that had flocked to him from all across the countryside would start scrambling to find rocks to pelt at him?

Well, let's take a look and see...

“To the Jews who *had* believed him Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”

Did you catch that? **“To the Jews who *had* believed him...”** He walked into this temple a respected man, but that respect was already beginning to dissipate. Like any other news sensation, Jesus' fifteen minutes of fame had come and gone. The same message and man who had at first fascinated and inspired the masses had already begun to frustrate and confuse them by the time Jesus walked into the temple to celebrate feast of Tabernacles with his fellow Jews.

But so, what is so wrong with what Jesus said here? I mean, it sure seems like all he is saying is that he came to set them free. What in the world is so wrong with freedom? The freedom that comes from Jesus is one of the big reasons y'all are here today!

Listen to how the crowd responded to this simple teaching however for a hint at what got them spitting mad: **“They answered him, ‘We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves to anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?’”**

Bottom line: The Devil is really good at what he does. He is subtle. He is wily. And he is really good at taking a *good* thing and turning it into an *ultimate* thing. Allow me to explain...

This Jewish crowd was rightfully honored to be descendants of Abraham. The Bible makes perfectly clear that being a descendant of Abraham was a beautiful and

amazing thing. Being a descendant of Abraham meant that you were a part of the one family that God had chosen from every other family on the planet to be his special family. Being a descendant of Abraham meant that you were, by nature of your birth, the heirs of some amazing and unique promises from God. It meant that you had firsthand access to the very thoughts and words of God spoken and recorded by his prophets. It meant that you were a part of that family from whom the long-promised Messiah would come.

Being a descendant of Abraham was a *good* thing.

But it was never meant to be an *ultimate* thing.

What do I mean by an *ultimate* thing?

An ultimate thing is something you hang your hat on at the end of the day.

“This is who I am. This is what gives me identity. This is what gives me purpose. This is what I live for. This is what helps me sleep at night. This is what I'm trusting in for my future happiness.

Essentially, an ultimate thing is your god – the thing in your life that brings you pride, joy, happiness, peace, purpose, identity, hope unlike anything else.

Over thousands of years the devil had been subtly and steadily turning the Jewish ancestral heritage from a *good thing* into an *ultimate thing*. So that by the time Jesus began preaching and teaching to these masses of Jews they were essentially more proud of Abraham (their great-great-great-great-grandpa) than they were of the God who chose Abraham in the first place.

The crowd picked up stones that day because Jesus was attacking their very identity. He was saying to them, “You think it is a big deal to be a descendant of Abraham, but it's not as big of a deal as you think it is. This thing you are so proud of, it's not as important, not as cool as you think. Abraham was a start, but God's plans are much bigger than just one family, one race, one nation.”

“You Israelites are hoping that by being a part of Abraham's family you will continue to enjoy a special relationship with God. But Abraham is not enough. Abraham, though he passed many special blessings on to his family, one blessing he didn't pass on, because he couldn't, was forgiveness. You think being a descendant of Abraham is enough for your life, but it's not. It's not because it doesn't make you free in any real and lasting way because he doesn't set you free from your greatest and ultimate need – forgiveness from sin... **Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.** (You think you are a part of God's family because of Abraham, but you are not. You are a slave in God's household, and slaves don't get to hang out with God forever. You need more than Abraham. You need the Son. You need me.)”

Well, the Jews didn't like this one bit. Jesus was attacking their very identity. He was taking one of the things they were most proud of and saying it was a pretty silly, pointless thing to proud of. And that got the Jews riled up. “Jesus you can call us sinners that need to repent, you can tell us that there are something we need to change, but this

is too far. This is something we love, something we are proud of. This is something our God gave us, how dare you say anything bad about Abraham!”

Immediately after the verses we read a bit ago the back and forth continues between Jesus and these Jews. They accuse him of thinking he is better than Abraham, they accuse him of being demon-possessed to which Jesus clearly says, “I *am* better than Abraham because I am Abraham’s God.” Then the shouts, the stones, and Jesus bolting for the back door. He walked into the temple a respected man. He left hated and rejected.

The devil had turned a good thing into an ultimate thing and when Jesus had the audacity to bring that subtle but still very real idolatry to light they were ready to kill him for it.

Today is Reformation, and so I can’t help but realize that Martin Luther had a very similar experience. He too approached a group of people who had turned a good thing (the Catholic Church which for a long time was built on the teaching of the apostles and prophets – the truth of Jesus that sets us free) and turned it into an ultimate thing (So that being a part of the church and the health of the church became more important than the message of the church). And when he had the audacity to point that out people got mad and offended and tried to kill him.

It all makes me wonder, what subtle idolatries could Jesus point out if he came into this temple, this church building today? What good things has the devil turned into ultimate things in our lives? And how would we respond if Jesus were to point them out to us? Would we repent, or would we get offended, even angry?

Think about it. What is *the* thing in your life that if Jesus came to you today and said, “I’m going to take this away from you today,” you would scoff, or panic, or get angry? What is the thing in your life that is a good blessing that God himself gave you that the devil is or has been subtly but steadily turning into an ultimate thing?

Is it your family? Those kids whose crazy-busy schedules have you focused so much on raising well-rounded, well-educated adults that you turn the *good* of raising your children well to the best of your ability into an *ultimate* thing as your home devotional life is non-existent, your Sunday worship attendance is spotty at best. Would it offend you if I as your pastor told you that you need to stop signing your kids up for every event under the sun if it means you aren’t feeding them daily from the word? Would it offend you if I reminded you that your kids, although gifts from God, are not all that special, and their future accomplishments not all that important, at least not when compared to God and your relationship to God, and their relationship to God?

Is it your career? That good job that pays the bills and provides for your family, that job that fills your life with purpose, a job you actually enjoy doing, that if Jesus came and took it away from you, you would be left floundering because that was your identity, that was who you were, that was what you were trusting in to provide for you and your family, and your future... Would it offend you if I reminded you that your career is not an opportunity for you to advance your own agenda to provide a cushy living for you and your family but instead it is supposed to be another avenue for you to

advance God’s agenda by faithfully and generously giving from your income back to the Lord, and seeing your job as first of all an opportunity to be Christ’s ambassadors to your little corner of the world, sharing his love and his message with those whom your job enables you to build relationships with? Would that offend you?

Is it, like those Jews, and the Roman Catholics, this church, your historical religious traditions? Has the devil taken the very good fact that your family has been a part of St. Paul’s for generations and turned it into an ultimate thing? If Jesus came and said, “You know I want St. Paul’s to close its doors. I want the numbers to just slowly creep down and the offerings with the numbers until you can’t pay the bills. I want my sheep to feed somewhere else.” How would you feel? Not that I’m going to, but would it offend you if I as the “New pastor” changed everything about St. Paul’s except the Word that we preach? What if I determined that the best way to communicate God’s Word to you and the world was to change everything we do, the hymns we sing, the prayers we say, the liturgies we follow – again, not that I’m going to, but for the sake of argument, if I did, how would you feel? Have you become more attached to the traditions of the church than to the message of the church? Has the devil taken a good thing, the traditions of the church you grew up in, and turned them into an ultimate thing that would floor you and leave your faith floundering and looking for stones to throw at the “new guy” if they were taken away?

I could go on and on friends because I have lots of subtle idols in this heart of mine, and God’s word is really good at exposing them all – all those good things that the devil subtly and steadily turns into ultimate things.

Today Jesus calls on us, just like he was trying to do with his fellow Israelites, just like he led Martin Luther to do almost 500 years ago, to identify where the devil has led us to put our hope and if it is in anyone or anything other than Jesus, the Son, and the truth that he preached, to realize the error of our ways. Because just like Abraham couldn’t save the Israelites from their sins, just like being Catholic doesn’t automatically men entrance to heaven – which means both of those things are pretty poor substitutes for God as an ultimate thing – neither can your family, or your career, the traditions of this church, or anyone or anything you clinging to save you from your sins... Which means all of those things need to remain good things, not ultimate things because though those things are good gifts from God they do not address your ultimate and greatest need – forgiveness and your relationship with God.

Those things need to be put in their proper place in your heart and in your life. On the list of things you love and the things you do with the finite amount of time, money, and energy God has given you those things need to be well under the Son because only the Son can forgive your sins and heal your relationship with God. Only the Son can set you free.

Jesus needs to be our only ultimate thing because Jesus is the only one who can actually follow through on the promises that ultimate things offer. Jesus, the Son, is the only thing in this world that can give you real and lasting meaning, identity, purpose, peace, and hope because only Jesus can take you and change you from slaves to sin in

God's world to sons in God's house – sons who will enjoy a place in God's house forever.

And the beautiful part friends... the beautiful truth that Jesus has to share with us and the world – the truth he wanted to share with those Israelites – he has done it. He has forgiven our sins. He has made us a part of God's house. And then, because we are so bad at falling for the temptations of the devil, he day after day places his truth before our eyes to remind us of our forgiveness, our identity as dearly loved children of God. He sends his Spirit into our hearts to create and strengthen faith in him as the only ultimate thing we will ever need.

Friends, as Lutherans we celebrate Reformation not to build on the tradition or history of Martin Luther, but to build and celebrate the faith of Martin Luther – faith in the Son as the only ultimate thing, faith in the truth he taught, truth that sets us free from so many, infinitely smaller things than he. Is it offensive and hurtful to have you idols identified and smashed? Yes. But Jesus promises us today it is also the most freeing, liberating truth you will ever find in this world. So, let's remember those who have gone before us and imitate their faith – faith in the Son who sets us free.

Amen.