

- Hi Judy.

- "Men of Athens," so the Apostle Paul as he looked around at idols and altars, "I perceive that in every way you are very religious." They were both more and less religious than they thought. Some of my best friends are idol worshipers, and so am I, and so are you at times. And I'd like to say a good word today for idolatry and for idols. For idolatry, surely there is a right instinct, the expression of a real need, the effort to become an organized integrated person, in the giving of loyalty and devotion to that which is beyond us, outside us, and to seeking and finding those objects of devotion, which seem worthy of such allegiance. The discovery of sacredness, the ascription of ultimacy, and worth, and power, and relevance to daily round. The commitment to these relative objects of devotion. Surely there is in the human heart some hunger, some need for such expression. And there's something fine about the person who in such commitment, gives his loyalty and allegiance to a great cause or a team or school or a dream. Perhaps we lack the ancient sense of a pervasive moaner spirit. Through everything symbolized especially in some particular trees or stones or idols made by human hands. But we too sense that we are dependent upon more than we are. We sense forces operative in our existence. We throw in with some and give them our high and costly devotion. "Men of Athens," said Paul, "looking at some such objects, I perceive that in every way, you are very religious." And so are we, we too are more religious than we think. There's a truly religious quality about much of our everyday dealing, with persons, and things, and ideas, causes, institutions, even when we think we're not religious. Such idolatry would seem to vary, to grow From a tentative kind still testing for what is really worthy of devotion. Still keeping the freedom to withdraw from entanglement to extricate from this arms length involvement. You can supply the illustrations, you know exactly what I mean. To a more seriously devoted kind. A really involving devotion or allegiance. A Marine to the core, a Yale man, or more exhaustively to wife or to husband, child or friend or democratic party or labor union. What I like about such idolatries is their open, honest recognition of value laying hold of persons, and their self-giving devotion. Their surrender of self to more than self. Their underlying affirmation that life belongs to more than just ourselves within our skin. Their effort to relate ultimacy to the here and now. Now, a clean idolatry like this, if there is such a clean idolatry perhaps they are sinners as idolaters too. But a clean, honest worship of idols like this would tend to test and rank its gods, until a sort of pantheon emerged, with some given priority over most of life and other idols. Some conflicting idols eliminated or subordinated. It's a good thing, isn't it? To discover what matters more and most, what is better and what is best. This brings us to say a good thing for the idols themselves. There's nothing like a good, honest idol, without any devices to make it look more than it really is. I've always had misgivings about the placing of food before some statue, which when the worshiper was gone could be sneakily taken by the priests for their own sustenance. But giving the worshiper the impression that this was alive and active being before which he bowed. Let idols be out in the open. Big juggernauts going down the street in a homecoming parade. The good thing in such cases is that you can look them over and see how much they really amount to. And if they're just tissue on chicken wire floats, they're gone with the wind and the rain and such a limited idolatry is not very risky. But if it is something real stable and worth devotion, that's different. Perhaps a nation state, it's there, we can give our

devotion to it. We can see what is the outcome of such devotion, and measure the worth of such an idol. Or let us say the white race, here is something you can see, and test and try if it really be worthy of a man's ultimate devotion, and discover that it is not, or the god is success. Look her over, try her out, an honest idol like this, not a concealed one, and see if he really is what you want for the surrender of all your being. The good thing about these honest idols out in the open is that they can be examined and superseded, more of that later. Yes, there's much to be said for idolatry and for idols, when they're honest and open and clean. But there's another kind of idolatry that bothers me, where it is not a true devotion but a dodge of responsibility, or a reduction of ultimate claims upon us. For example, you take the audience St. Paul addressed in Athens, not the Jews and the devout persons with whom he argued in the synagogue, they had some commitments. Perhaps not the Epicurean and stoic philosophers who were curious about his deliverances. They too had a view of reality and belonged to it, but at least some of the people in the marketplace including foreigners visiting there, spent their time according to the author of Acts, in nothing except telling or hearing something new. A sort of sermon tasters, purveyors of philosophical tidbits, boosters running to hear and tell the latest. Having a semblance of the seeking of truth, but not really an ultimate commitment, a dallying with ideas, but not an honest surrender to those worth claiming them. One has the feeling that these were not really good, honest idol worshipers. They probably didn't put up the idols or the altars. Probably they superciliously made fun of those who had. Rather, they worshiped themselves. They enjoyed their own inflated egos, spilled with the latest, seeming the brightest. They played the intellectual games of one upmanship, gamesmanship, with refined devastating ways of contemptuously or patronizingly reducing others to humiliation. This kind of idolatry, this self worship, this projection of self out beyond and then bowing down to this, this is a bogus kind. And it's a worse for its semblance of devotion to truth. Deceptive, dishonest, a problem not only of Ancient Athens, but of much of our intellectual life. And perhaps you and I sometimes enter into such idolatry. "They exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship then serve the creature rather than the creator." Said Paul in another connection. The trouble with this kind of idolatry is partly in its self deception and deception of others. In its protection against the discovery of what is really true and worthy of devotion. Another dangerous idolatry results when an idol exerts a total, a disproportionate claim successfully upon us. Paul Tillich, that other St. Paul of our intellectual Athens of today, has spoken of the ultimate concern with success and with social standing and economic power. He writes, "It is a God of many people in the highly competitive Western culture, and it does what every ultimate concern must do. It demands unconditional surrender to its laws, even if the price is a sacrifice of genuine human relations, personal conviction and creative (indistinct). Its threat is social and economic defeat and its promise indefinite as all such promises, the fulfillment of one's being. It is a breakdown of this kind of faith," says Tillich, "which characterizes and makes religiously important most contemporary literature. When fulfilled the promise proves to be empty." Still another perilous idolatry occurs over and over in organized religion itself. When we sneak our little gods into the Holy of Holies, when we make of our little values ultimate values, when creeds and codes and cults, these necessities as media are the expression of God to man and of man responding to God, these needed elements in religion. When these are given intrinsic rather than extrinsic meaning. Worship, liturgical worship, the beauty of music, all the way over on the other extreme, for those who criticize this precious informality. Either of these can become, need not, idolatry. Or our sermons, making, delivering or submitting to them. When we worship, not the eternal God but a lesser good meant for His glory, not our own. The institution of religion, another necessary means or medium of the expression of God to man, and

man to God, becomes a dangerous end in itself, with its perennial tendency to exalt itself. Let's be honest about it. Our own perennial tendencies as individuals and as leaders to give ultimacy to whatever institutions express our length and shadows. Its tendency then, our tendency, for this kind of corporate self exultation, the promotion and protection of the institution taking precedent over truth, and love, and service, idolatry. Where you may have your forms and I have mine. Religious experience can become another idol rather than confrontation by God or religious nurture or theology itself. We may slowly solve our own particular ways of interpreting the reality of God in our experience. That conformity to this, rather than correction of our ideas by what the eternal God really is and says to us, becomes our idol. In various ways we succeed in reducing the meaning and demand of the eternal God and of projecting our own exalted egos. We like manageable, domesticated deities. I do, it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the eternal God. It's much nicer to have a friendly, helpful, cosmic bellhop. And to criticize or to expose seems sacrilege. The norm is obscured, criticism is rejected, loyalty demanded, and oftentimes coercively secured. The point seems clear though, we may be more religious than we think when we are honestly serving idols. And less religious than we think when covertly serving self and little gods of self undercover of high religion, and all of us are so involved. While we're at it let's just say just one passing good word for atheism too, and agnosticism with it. The early Christians and the Jews before them were often accused of atheism, because they would not worship the little idols around. They had an eternal principle of criticism which showed that not these things of every day and all around but the eternal God himself was alone worthy of their devotion. And so there may be among us many good, honest atheists, who want the truth so much that they are willing to sacrifice these little idols of various kinds of intellectual conformity, and all the superstitions which may involve us. In other words, sacrificing idolatrous religion in search for real truth. Wasn't it Tennyson who's struggling over the sorrow when his friend Arthur Hallam died, and facing the breakup of much traditional religious thought in the Darwinian century, who affirmed that there lived more faith in honest doubt, than in half the creeds. But then of course there are other kinds of atheism too, and maybe we don't always have the clean, honest, open kind of atheism either. There are atheisms, which are again simply a hidden idolatry of self, a rejection of the claims of the eternal God, because we prefer our own ways. And we reduce Him to what we see as supposed manifestation of Him around us and this we can easily sweep aside. And so we claim in a sort of intellectual arrogance that we don't believe those silly superstitions. There can be a good atheism, a sort of tentative provisional seeking of the real truth, and a sweeping away of much to the shallow and insignificant or and we have amazing talent for using such possibilities, or a dishonest idolatrous kind of atheism itself. Well, I've spoken well of idolatry, and of atheism. Insofar as these represent a real devotion of the self to that which seems at least provisionally to be worth one's ultimate devotion, but we can't rest here. In the words of Emerson. "When the gods arrive, the half gods go." And the real test of honest idolatry is its response to what actually proves itself finally worthy of all our devotion. Comes a time when the unknown God who is behind our worship, who has evoked this seeking of Himself, says to us through one or other of His spokesmen, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by man, nor is He served by human hand as though he needed anything. Since He Himself gives to all man life and breath and everything, being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deities like gold or silver or stone, a representation of the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all men everywhere to repent. Because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed. And of this He has given assurance to all men by raising

him from the dead." The great and glorious thing about our Jewish and Christian heritage, is that a stringent searching prophetic principle which says to us in all our idolatries, "Beyond these is reality itself. Search and try and prove that which is good, but be ready to discover that your idols are simply provisional." Sometimes high religion has completely eliminated such idols. And one of the problems in our Protestantism arises from the fact that having swept aside so drastically the ways in which men perceive and represent the eternal God who speaks through symbols to the human heart. We have oftentimes substituted ourselves, and our utterances and our ideas as a new kind of intellectual idol, taking the place of visual ones. On the other hand, other kinds of Christianity have tried to convert the idols rather than eliminate them. Have taken over from the cultures which they're converting many of the little gods and practices, and festivals and representations with the hope that, and this is a good hope, these would not become finalities, but media, symbols that God could use and speak through these things, and times, and persons of the visible institution of the great church. But here again, just as in Protestant radicalism we have found our other idolatries, soul in Catholic inclusivism. We have found ourselves lapsing also over and over again into giving finality to that which is only provisional, temporal representative of what is good and what is ultimate. Yet, there is a testing tendency in human nature and a disclosing power in ultimate reality, which will not leave us content with these idolatries, these within our churches or within our secular life. I like that story of Arthur Compton the great physicist in his earlier days when he was commissioned to run an experiment to test and hypothesis, given a grant for his exploration. And after months of patient work setting up his equipment and running as many tests he was walking across the campus one day and met an older physicist who said, "Arthur how are things going?" And he confessed with some discomfiture that they weren't proving what he had hoped to prove. Said the older physicist, "Well, Arthur, the way things are is tremendously more exciting than the way we thought they were." And this is a perennial discovery. The discovery, not so much bias as to us of what is finally worth all we are. What does all this mean for us, for the church what is needed for myself and you? First such openness to prophetic criticism such penitence for our own limited idolatries, such concern for what is really true and good, such recognition in short of the rightful norm of Christ over the church, over us, that we may hear and heal, having our faith and our life corrected by what is. And second such on anxious trust, faith, in the real ultimacy of God and His Lordship overall our other gods. That we need not coercively, manipulatively, control others to bolster our little faith or serve our ecclesiastic, theological or moral idols. Third, such recognition and experience of God in our lives such perception of Him in our history, that we can and confidently take the indicative rather than the imperative mood, that we can point to what really is rather than putting the pressure on others' super egos as to what they ought to do and believe and practice. And fourth, such love for God and men that we demonstrate or mediate His accepting love and claim to others with integrity and winsomeness and unflinching concern, ready to go the second mile. Who is sufficient for these things? "Thine oh Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine. Thine is the kingdom oh Lord and thou art exalted as head above all. Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the communion of His Holy Spirit be with us all."