

UNINTENTIONAL WORSHIP

David Foster Wallace, novelist who penned *Infinite Jest*, among other books, spoke to the 2005 graduating class at Kenyon College. While spirituality is largely absent from his stories, he insightfully said to the young people gathered before him,

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.

He went on to point out that the secular objects of adoration –wealth, beauty, the intellect, power, sexual allure- “will eat you alive” because they leave you feeling inadequate and “you will die an million deaths before they finally plant you [in the ground].” He went on to observe,

The insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they are evil or sinful; it is that they are unconscious. They are default settings. They’re the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that’s what you’re doing.

People –and many of them are Christians- “gradually slip into” worship “without ever being fully aware of what they’re doing” because our affections, dispositions and values are shaped by influences that are so pervasive that we don’t even notice them. But they get under our skin and into our hearts and attitudes before we ever think about them. They get to us through the TV we watch, the news sources we select, the advertising we see, the cheering and jeering we hear, and the secular rituals we practice at ball games or bars or work places.

Scripture admonishes us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). We need to repeatedly put ourselves in situations where God can work on us with influences that counteract the influences that daily press upon us, often without our awareness.

We need to adopt habitual practices that can work on our hearts and minds, shaping the way we see the world and how we feel about other people who may be different from ourselves. These practices certainly include worship. Sharing in the Lord’s Supper, the practice of giving, embracing one another in fellowship and serving those in need, are all crucial. Of course we need to ponder the message of scripture, particularly the Gospels and allow our attachments, affections and ideas to be challenged and transformed.

Many things seek our love and loyalty, from grocery stores to political parties. We need to be careful about giving too much of our hearts away. Jesus taught, “No one can serve two masters for a servant will be devoted to one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24). We can end up inadvertently despising Jesus and offering worship to values not worthy of our souls if we are not careful and attentive. Idolatry is not just an ancient and irrelevant problem. It is a matter of the heart. The things we cherish capture our hearts, as Jesus told us (Matthew 6:21). We need to do the deeds that turn our hearts to God and maintain those practices that will shape our affections in cruciform ways. And we need to encourage each other along the way.