

October 11, 2020

“The Golden Calf”
Sermon by Shelby Perez, MID

Scripture Readings:

Exodus 32: 1-14

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.’ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”’ The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.’

But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, ‘O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, “I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever.”’ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Philippians 4:1-9

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

This text from Exodus is a familiar one to most of us, the story of the “Golden Calf.” Each time I read it, it feels like I hear it in a new way and find something new to learn. This week as I prepared to preach I had a few thoughts go through my head, and if I am being honest the newness of this reading was related to global pandemics and global community. And I had another scripture come to mind this time. Galatians 6:7, “God is not mocked.”

I have read the story of the Golden Calf and many times thought of idolatry, and what idolatry looks like today. The valuing of money over people, the valuing of possessions over our neighbor, valuing attention and validation on social media over deep and meaningful relationships with one another.

As I recall the Galatians text, I connect these two—mocking God and idolatry. Idolatry is valuing something more than God. And God has called us to love one another and to love God. When we love things and money more than we love each other—we commit idolatry. We aren’t just valuing something more than God, we are throwing the very sanctity of life we have been gifted back in God’s face. We are not simply turning away, we are audaciously mocking God’s love for us and all of creation when we turn inward from creation and God. And God is not mocked.

God has created and molded each of us with tender love, caring intention, fearfully and wonderfully. God knew us before we were us, and God will know us when we are no longer us.

God has not made mistakes, and has lovingly made each of us unique and who we are. And God has asked us to love each other as God loves us—without conditions and without restraint.

That is a tall order. We are not perfect by any stretch of the imagination—or at least I'm not. Loving people we do not like is hard, and at times it feels impossible. Even loving the people in the world that we do not know feels difficult. We may see something pop up on the news and go “Well they deserved what they got” or we may see something and say “Why can't they just accept this quietly and leave me alone?” “Why can't they be less vocal/visible so I don't have to see this?”

And that, is not only idolatry, it is mocking God. It is standing at the base of the mountain where God is communing with Moses, and demanding a god be made of gold, and then dancing around it. We have placed our own lives, and the comfort of our lives ahead of others, and we celebrate it.

I spent the first six months of this pandemic working as a hospital chaplain in Milwaukee. I worked on intensive care units, and saw many COVID patients. I witnessed daily the suffering these patients went through, and the suffering these families experienced. The most difficult part of my job was not wearing a mask and face shields for 12 hour shifts, it was standing at the bedside of a heart transplant patient I knew, who was a lovely man, a pastor, a loving father and grandfather and uncle. A man who always had a smile. I stood there at his bedside as he died. The only people that could see him were two of his sons—within no more than 24 hours of each other, and this was only allowed because he was dying.

This man had 11 children. I helped arrange a Zoom call with his other family and his one son who was there in person, and said prayers with them. A few days later I met his other son, and I held a grown man as he cried. As I was in the room witnessing the love and care these family members were sharing, the only thing I could think was “He deserves a better death than this. He deserves to be surrounded by his loved ones.” He was not the first COVID patient I cried with or for. Nor was he the last.

I count it as one of the greatest honors of my life that I got to journey with patients and families through the dying process. I also count it as a great honor to wear my mask every time I leave my home. Life is a precious gift. My life is something I am deeply grateful for. As are the lives of my loved ones. The lives of strangers I have never met, and will never meet, are also precious to me.

I have watched what this virus does to the human body and the human spirit. I have held the nurses and doctors who care for these patients as they cry because it is exhausting to bear witness to that suffering every day, and to carry the burden of fear that they may infect their loved ones at home, or poor unsuspecting strangers they encounter at the store.

Life is precious. God breathed into the world and shaped the land and sea and created each living thing with care. And God shapes each of us with tenderness and love. And then God breathes life into us. The very breath of God lives in us, and in the stranger. My life is no more precious than that of someone else. Certainly, my comfort or discomfort is not. Whether it is wearing a mask,

or listening to someone as they share with me their experiences of oppression or violence. Things in life may make us uncomfortable. Life is fairly uncomfortable. Loving is uncomfortable. And God loves abundantly and asks that we do as well. We have God's grace for when we fail—because we are only human.

God calls us, each of us, to love one another and the world around us as much as we can. To love one another is to love God, and to love God is to love one another. When we choose things and self over others, we choose them over God. We create our Golden Calf and we choose to worship that, to value that above God, and in the process, we mock God. We say "I am choosing me over you. And there's nothing you can do about it."

Throughout this story of the Hebrew people searching for the promised land God becomes exasperated. Moses intervenes time and time again, asking for reprieve, for God's grace. And God without fail, gives that grace. God knows we are human and that we will stumble and fall and we will mess it up. God gave the Hebrew people that grace, but not without proper chastisement. Not without the demand that they try harder and do better. The Hebrew people were God's chosen people, and they struggled, and God did not abandon them. God continually asked more of them.

We are human, but God asks us to try to be better than what we are, every day. We are all growing, we are all learning, and God is asking us to wake up each day and learn from yesterday and do better today, to turn away from our Golden Calves toward God. It is not an easy ask. Nothing about following God's call is easy.

The Hebrew people wandered for forty years in the desert. Jesus was executed by the Roman Empire for preaching love. Early Christians were persecuted and mocked, and executed for 300 years. The Jewish people suffered pogroms for hundreds of years and then suffered during the Holocaust. Nothing about God's calling is easy. The Golden Calf is prettier, shinier, and makes us put much less of ourselves at risk for even discomfort. God's call makes us put our lives behind the lives of others and behind our love and commitment to God.

Each person hearing this message has made the choice to, you each are listening because you call yourself a Christian. This title is an honor, and it is a responsibility and a commitment to God. When we are baptized we enter into a covenant, when we affirm our baptism in confirmation we enter into yet another covenant. These covenants are with our immediate community. The covenants are with God to put no other gods before God, to live our lives committed to the teachings and preaching of Jesus. These covenants are also with the world more broadly. We promise that we are committing ourselves to the betterment of the world around us, to the lives of the other people in the world, and to God.

My favorite hymn is "Here I am Lord" which is based on an Isaiah text. And the chorus says:
Here I am, Lord
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night
I will go, Lord

If You lead me
I will hold Your people in my heart

“I will hold your people in my heart.” All people are God’s people. To hold them in our hearts is to love them, and loving them is an active thing. Loving them is thinking about how my actions and words will impact others, not just those who will hear and interact with me directly, but also those who will hear and interact with those I have spoken to or interacted with. And all those who will hear and interact with those people. And so on.

What we do, what we say—this extends far beyond ourselves. As God’s people loving all of God’s people—we are choosing the path less traveled, the path that is overgrown with brambles and tree roots. It is not an easy path we have chosen to follow God. To know love and to know how to love, are gifts beyond anything. Love of God and neighbor are so much more precious and rewarding than dancing around a golden statue, despite the scrapes and stumbles and tumbles we will experience along the way.

Amen.



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