

GOLDEN CALVES

I mentioned last week when we read the Parable of the Evil Tenants, that I had considered just skipping over it because it is a difficult passage and it takes some hard mental and spiritual application to hear the good news that is in it. Well the parable of the King and the Wedding Feast is pretty much the same message. In the end, they both come down to the reality that our God is good and faithful and forgiving, But getting to that good news is a struggle. We don't need to do that again this week. That's why we are going to take up the light hearted, favorite children's story about the Golden Calf instead. No, it's not really-light hearted or a great children's story, it's just that it's more about human weakness and error than about human greed, depravity and violence.

This famous event in the took place shortly after God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments as they were wandering in the desert after the great escape from Egypt where they had been living in slavery. The Ten Commandments it turns out are just a summary of God's Law. After giving them to the people, Moses stays up on the mountain and receives the whole of the Law. It takes a really long time. Just read Leviticus you'll get an idea of how long *if* you can manage to stay awake long enough. So the people are getting restless. They are frightened and unsure without Moses and his hot line to the Almighty.

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." ² 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." ³ So all

the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron.
⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, 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!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." ⁶ 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. ⁷ The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ 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 worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹ The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ 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? ¹² 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. ¹³ 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 forever.'" ¹⁴ And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Those of us who grew up going to church and Sunday School all have a childhood memory of the picture in the children's Bible of a gigantic shiny gold statue of a calf. The one I remember had rubies for eyes as if the gold wasn't flashy enough. I remember looking at that picture, being drawn to it because it was so bright and shiny. I've always been kind of a bling girl—I still like sequined t shirts and rhinestone jewelry.

But I also remember thinking two things about this story way back when I was in elementary school. Number one was practical skepticism: how could they possibly have been carrying all that gold with them—they could've just bought themselves out of slavery if they were that wealthy. (Well, it turns out they did have a bunch of gold and jewels because they stole it from the Egyptians on their way out of town. But that part of the story doesn't usually get told to children.) Still, how could they possibly have had the equipment they would have needed to melt all that gold and then mold it into the shape of a gigantic calf. Like a lot – maybe all?—of children, I was a Biblical literalist. But I was not raised in a tradition where you were encouraged to question and think about what God might actually be saying to us in Scripture, so I kept my mouth shut.

Seriously though, I don't think you need a formal theological education to understand that historical accuracy is not the important thing here. Whether it was a giant sculpture made of pure gold is not the key to understanding why God got so angry.

The other thing that always struck me about this story was just the incredible lack of common sense these people showed. They are the first-hand beneficiaries of God's amazing work to free them from the bonds of slavery. All those plagues on the Egyptians, the parting of the Red Sea, the Manna in the desert and they are throwing God over for an idol that they made themselves five minutes after he has given them the Ten Commandments. I mean were they stupid?

No they were not. We don't have time to go into it in great detail today, but the commandment that you shall not make for yourself a graven image is wrapped into the commandment that you shall have no other gods before me. In Jewish tradition, it is one commandment. The prohibition is against worshipping something other than Almighty God as if that something were the image of God. They didn't think that golden calf was a being with supernatural powers, but perhaps they thought they had created an image of God.

So God is like "really? I look like a cow?" No wonder God gets so angry. That isn't really why. God is angry because of how quickly these people succumbed to their own fear. They lost their trust in God as soon as they lost that sense of immediate accessibility, and they became afraid. They could not tolerate the risk that is entailed in having faith in an unseen God. So they try to reduce that risk by domesticating God into something they can control. Their great sin here is to substitute an available god produced by human hands for the sovereign One who is not immediately available and who is not formed in the image of something humans can create for themselves. The first of God's commandments requires receiving, accepting, and obeying this unheard and unseen God who is not subject to human formation.

Unheard and unseen in that direct sense that the Israelites were looking for when they became afraid in Moses' absence. Unseen and unheard in the sense that we cannot ever completely get our head around God. But seen and heard everywhere. God chose to reveal God's self to us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, through Scripture and through the means of Grace, we know God's love and we know of the salvation that we have in Jesus Christ. And by the power of the Spirit, we experience God in all kinds of ways—when we are in the mountains, on the beach, in our hospitals and universities. Even in church. We can feel God in this building when we sing together and when we listen for God in the music and the Scriptures. Still, God is not like the person sitting next to you who you can

reach out and touch. God doesn't speak to people the way people speak to each other.

And so, the Israelites lost their faith because they were afraid. They were afraid God had left them.

Do not think for a moment that this weakness of faith, this fear that leads to the creation of man-made idols is a characteristic of primitive, generally unfaithful people. Let me just start naming our golden calves: gold for starters; automobiles, football, lifestyle, the American Flag, Capitalism, even religious beliefs. Especially religious beliefs. We all have it in us to think that it is up to us to decide who and what God is. We think we can predict God's wrath, judgment and mercy all at once. God is here to tell you, don't. Don't do it. You don't know. I am indeed an unseen, unheard God. I am who I am God says. Your created idols are not me.

God's visceral reaction to idolatry isn't borne out of some gigantic cosmic ego problem. Although if anyone was entitled to a massive ego it would be God. But that isn't it. Ego is a human thing that can become an idol itself. God has no ego.

God abhors idolatry because it is harmful to the human condition. We create our false idols out of fear. Fear that God isn't really there for us. Fear that we are on our own and have to create our own sense of purpose and security.

In the end, all the other commandments are subsumed in this prohibition against idol worshipping. When a person commits murder, the hate or the depravation that leads to it has become an idol. When a person lies, cheats and steals to get what is most important to them then whatever that is has become an idol. If we are so obsessed with our desire for someone or something else that it interferes with our love of God, then that someone or something has become an idol.

When we turn to these human-created idols, we misuse the gifts that God has given us. God gives us everything we need to live fulfilled, meaningful, compassionate lives. We will never do that if we spend our lives chasing our own golden calves. And that is why idol worship makes God so angry.

God gets angry all right. He blows his stack. But he gets over it. He sent his only son to bring the New Covenant sealed in his blood for the forgiveness of our sins. So even when we are disobedient and let our golden calves come between us and God, God does not abandon us. God calls us to repent, change and turn back to God, not because God is demanding but because God is the only true source of a purposeful, meaningful life. And God is always there not just waiting for us to realize that, but seeking us always. Calling us back to his way. That is the good news. Alleluia Amen.

Let us sing of the abundance of gifts we receive from God.

My Shepherd Will Supply My Need #803