

A Stiff-Necked People
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Westminster Presbyterian Church, Ontario, CA
October 11, 2020
Year A - 28^h Sunday in Ordinary Time
Exodus 32:1-14; Matthew 22:1-14

What's your first reaction after hearing the Exodus passage we heard this morning?

Honestly, my first reaction, as a pastor, is that I want to go and strangle Aaron. Aaron is supposed to be acting in Moses' absence as the spiritual leader of the Israelites. Aaron is supposed to keep them on the straight and narrow while Moses is receiving God's word on how the Israelites are to conduct themselves.

Apparently, getting God's instructions was not a quick and easy process for Moses. Moses' conference with God on Mount Sinai went on for quite a while, quite a while longer than suited the impatient Israelites. They go en masse to Aaron and demand that he make gods to protect them for the remainder of the journey to the Promised Land.

Aaron, who should have started knocking heads together right then and there, makes a stunningly awful decision. He instantly accedes to the people's demand and sets about melting all of the gold in camp so that he can make a statue of a calf and then declare that this calf is Israel's new god and they should forget all about the true God, Who delivered them from slavery and has provided for them on their perilous trek to freedom.

I think it's safe to say that Aaron's next performance review is going to flag several very serious concerns.

When God sees what is going on down in the Israelite camp, He throws His divine hands up in disgust and declares that He's done with the lot of them, a "stiff-necked people," and ready to start all over. Moses will be assigned to a new people to be fashioned into a great nation.

At this point, it's a little difficult for us today to reconcile the forgiving God of grace we meet in the New Testament with the God Who is ready to wipe out an entire people for one lapse in theological judgment. We can understand God's anger but we don't want to believe in a God Who would go the way of mass termination of lives.

So, it falls on Moses, the only Israelite whom God still trusts, to bring out God's forgiving side. You made a covenant, says Moses. And God doesn't break covenants.

And let us be very thankful that God does not break covenants. The Israelites are not the last stiff-necked people to walk the Earth. The Israelites are not the last stiff-necked people to allow themselves to be distracted from faith by adversity and inconvenience. The Israelites are not the last stiff-necked people to bow down to false idols.

And, tragically, Aaron is not the last spiritual leader to steer his flock way off the track.

Speaking of spiritual leaders, it has been customary for centuries that this Exodus passage be a springboard for condemnation of the idols of popular culture that can knock all of us off-track. I should know, because I have preached many such sermons in my day and the folks at Westminster have likely heard one or two . . . or three . . . or four . . .

Today, I want to focus less on what's out there in the culture, as worthy as all of that might be condemnation, and make it very personal. I believe that each of us is prone to set up idols in our own lives, individual idols known maybe only to us as individuals.

An "idol" does not have to be something as evil-looking as a golden calf. An "idol" can be something that maybe is inherently good by itself. The thing does not make itself an idol. We are the ones who elevate the thing to an idol by our attitudes toward it and our actions.

Let's take a really obvious example. Food. What is wrong with food? Nothing. We need

food to live. Without food, we would die. Theologically, there is absolutely no basis for condemning food as being automatically idolatrous.

But we can certainly treat food as an idol. The horrifying statistics on American obesity rates strongly suggest that we have a serious problem with food idolatry. God created each of us and bestowed upon each of us a duty to preserve our health and well-being for as long as possible. When we overeat, eat unhealthy foods or otherwise indulge in questionable dietary practices, we have elevated our love of food over our love of God. Our mouths might proclaim the primacy of our love for God but the rest of our bodies speak volumes otherwise.

What is idolatrous in your life? What are you allowing to come between you and God? We all have done it and we all do it. We all fall victim to idolatry of some sort. I'm afraid that's just another aspect of flawed human nature.

If you find that reality to be very disturbing and discouraging, I'm with you.

And that is why it is so vitally important that we remember God did not act when the Israelites created the Golden Calf. God's anger was checked on that day. And, in the person of Jesus Christ, the covenant that saved the Israelites was confirmed as the covenant that saves us all. Salvation is not an excuse to indulge in wanton acts of idolatry but a granting of space in which our faith can grow in spite of our human failings.

So that's my pretty much annual sermon on idolatry. I hope I gave you something new to think about, suggested a direction or two for your growth in faith. That's really the standard by which all sermons are judged.

And I really hope I did a better job with you than Aaron did with the Israelites.