



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“On Whose Terms?”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Exodus 32: 1-21

May 5, 2019

I think this story from Exodus is one of those that can be particularly difficult to digest. This notion of ripping off all our earrings and jewelry, melting into the form of a calf, and then worshipping that calf, is so foreign to our faith experience that we tend to be excessively metaphorical in our interpretations, if not outright dismissive, of the story. But, I think it's imperative to start with the spiritual and cultural realities of the time. You see, for the Israelites, this notion of 'monotheism' (that concept of there being one God and one God only), was still a very new and novel concept at the time of the Exodus. The Israelites lived in a polytheistic culture – a region in which it was common practice to refer to 'my god vs. your god' or to latch on to new gods when new needs arose. These were not people who grew up with the monotheistic mentality that is so natural to our worldview – these were people that were still coming to that base understanding of the true nature of the one and only God. Take the time, sometime, to read through many of the Old Testament stories that happen well after this event – you'll see that the surrounding culture of the period of the Exodus had little sense of there being just one God.

So, while it's hard for us to grasp sometimes, the notion of forming this calf is not as crazy, or unheard of, as we might think. This idea of forming a god you could worship and call upon was something that was part of the religious environment in which these people lived. This act of the Israelites was not nearly as unheard of as I think we tend to imagine in our 21st century monotheistic minds – so, why is it that Moses got so angry with the Israelites that day? And, right there, that's where I suggest the story speaks to us, today. To me, it's far less about the golden calf, and far more about on whose terms we come to our relationship with god!

Consider, if you will, what has happened in the story of the Israelites up until the point we read this morning. What starts with Moses at the burning bush, continues as a constant tale of God's presence and providence in the lives of the Israelites.

- After being called, Moses confronted Pharaoh again and again demanding the release of God's people. Each time Pharaoh refused, God brought a plague upon Egypt but spared the people of Israel.
- Once the Israelites were released, God went before the people in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night – always showing them the way and protecting their journey.

- At the brink of the Red Sea, with the Egyptian army pursuing them, and nowhere to turn, God parted the waters to allow the Israelites to cross on dry land, and then released the sea to destroy the pursuing army.
- Twice, when the Israelites were without water, God provided (once by turning bad water into good and another time by actually drawing water from a rock).
- Then, when hungry, God rained loaves of bread on the people so that there was more than they could ever eat.
- And now, on the mountain, God is inscribing the law on the tablets and further establishing the everlasting covenant God holds with the Israelites.

And with all of that in the background, what do the Israelites do? They make a calf!! That's why Moses was angry! It's not simply because the people dared to create some sort of god to worship – it's that these people had been spared, time and again, by the grace and providence of God, and that they proceeded to respond to that grace and providence by turning away from God the moment things didn't go their way. It's not the lack of monotheistic understanding that infuriates Moses – it's the fact that these people were the beneficiaries of God's abundant promises and still couldn't help but try to save themselves the moment God didn't respond on their terms!

There's an old joke, "I wanted to ask for a bike, but I knew God didn't work that way. So, I stole the bike, and asked God for forgiveness." The simple truth is that we want to come to God on our terms!

Ask yourself this –

- How often do you come to God in prayer without an answer already on your heart?
- How often do you genuinely bring a question to God without an expectation of what the answer will be?
- How often do you bring a concern to God without having already formed your idea of what the solution ought to look like?
- How often do you actually come to God, in spirit and faith, without some form of conscious (or subconscious) agenda that protects your priorities, your desires, and your expectations?

As much as we want it, God's work in our lives doesn't come on our terms, but the honest truth is that, more often than not, when God doesn't work on our terms, we don't wait, we don't alter our expectations and we don't adjust our will. The honest truth is that, when God doesn't work on our terms, we walk away and try to create a golden calf that will!

Think about it.

- When we come to God with a question and don't get the answer in the way we want, we keep asking in hopes of eventually getting the one we were looking for.
- When we come to God with a problem and the solution doesn't turn out to be what we expect, we go somewhere else and figure out a way to solve things ourselves.
- When come to God with a need and God's way of filling that need doesn't match with our priorities and desires, we will move on until we can fill the need in our way.

You see, the thing that really got Moses worked up as he descended with the tablets was not that the people had formed a calf out of gold to worship – this was relatively common practice at the time and Moses knew that as well as anyone. No – I suggest that the thing that truly infuriated Moses was that these people had been brought out of slavery, delivered from oppression, guided through the wilderness, shepherded through a parted sea, and satiated from a rock – and they still couldn't trust in God enough to wait for God's answer to their concerns. The thing that got Moses so infuriated was that these people had repeatedly experienced the unconditional love of God in their lives, but still insisted on coming to God with conditions of their own. And that, I argue, is a reality we know all too well.

We are children of God.

- We are the recipients of God's limitless, boundless, unconditional love shown to us in the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.
- We are people who get to mess up, screw up, foul up, turn away, run away, fall astray, sin, lie, cheat and any of a thousand other things we manage to do on a daily basis and still go to bed with the profound assurance of God's love in our lives and our place in God's kingdom.
- We are people who get to take one misstep after another and then return every Sunday morning and call on God's grace and providence in our lives because we know there is no limit to His love for us.
- We are people who gather to worship because we are confident in God's unconditional love for us.

But, still, the moment God doesn't answer a prayer our way, fix a need to our contentment, or lead us in a direction that is that is aligned with what I wanted – we are faced with the question of whether it will work the same way in return. The moment things don't go our way, we are forced to ask if God's unconditional love for us will be met with an unconditional love of our own. That was the problem with the Israelites. That was the issue, I suggest, that got Moses so upset. And, that is the challenge that we continue to face today! As faithful people who have received God's abundant and unconditional love shown to us in and through the cross, we have to ask ourselves if we are willing to have the faith and trust in that love to temper our wants, cast off our expectations, set aside our terms, and just come to God and allow God to show us the way.