

October 11, 2020
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 23—Year A
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Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

After a divergence for the Season of Creation, today we resume the usually assigned readings.

For our Hebrew Scripture, that means returning to Exodus and Moses and the Israelites. The last we heard, it was the first Passover. On the four Sundays we missed, the Israelites crossed the Red Sea; manna rained from heaven; water poured from a rock; and God pronounced the Ten Commandments. Of course, there is more to the story than those highlights. Most particularly, following the Ten Commandments, God detailed what the Israelites must do in order to live into a new covenant relationship with God. For most of it, God spoke to Moses during the first of two forty-day and forty-night retreats atop Mount Sinai. As today's reading begins, it's near the end of that first retreat, and God has just given Moses "the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God."¹

As for the Israelites, they've been out of Egypt for only a few months. Now physically encamped at the base of Mount Sinai, they remain emotionally on the edge of despair they have occupied since they left. Moses has been holding the people together. This current lengthy absence proves to be more than they can manage. Their leader is gone, and their God is with him. To fill the void, the people break the first two of the rules that God gave them only weeks earlier: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."²

Going along with the crowd, Aaron collects gold baubles from the people and fashions them into a statue of a calf. We probably know this part of the story pretty well. It's pretty simple, I guess: idolatry is bad and kind of silly. But let's look more closely at what's happening here. First notice that the people are trying to replace the creator God by themselves creating a god. It's just not going to work, it's can't work, not in any ultimately satisfactory way. Rather than a living God, they get something *lifeless*. Rather than a generous God, they get something to which they contribute without meaningful return. Rather than a relational God, they get only a reminder of that for which they yearn.

When you think about it, that golden calf is kind of pathetic. Still, it shouldn't be dismissed. The problem is, while it has no power of itself, it does have the power that people assign it. That's where the situation gets complicated and even dangerous.

Let's go back to Mount Sinai with God and Moses. God is unhappy with this situation. I imagine God thinking, "I have given them everything they need, and now they're doing *this*. With their useless junk, they make a *thing* and act like *that's* who has been taking care of them. I'd be jealous, but how can I be jealous of something that's actually nothing? I feel stupid and insulted and angry. I don't like feeling this way, and they're hopeless anyway, so I'm done! I'll just get rid of them, and then Moses and I can start over from scratch. It'll be great."

Apparently Moses is feeling chill from his time hanging out with God and away from those stubborn and complaining nitwits who have been such a burden to him. To God's activity report and action plan, Moses replies with something like, "Nah, we didn't come this far so you could just give up on them." "Fine," God huffs.

I hear God huffing because, even though things seem okay, I know how the story continues. Stop reading where we did, and it sounds pleasant and affirming. But keep reading, and you learn that Moses is chill only until he sees for himself that golden calf and the dancing attending it. What then ensues is mayhem. In a fit of his own anger, Moses breaks the tablets, destroys the golden calf, making from it a powder that he mixes with water and forces the people to drink, and recruits a squad of sword-wielders who kill three thousand of their fellow Israelites—sword-wielders who, by the way, are from what becomes the priestly tribe of Levi. To top off all that, God sends a plague upon the people.

You'll sometimes hear people making a distinction between that angry Old Testament God and the kindly New Testament one. I don't agree with that, and if you're tempted to go there, you might consider the parable we heard today from Matthew. Again, after our four-week break, I should mention the setting. Jesus, having spent his ministry in Galilee, has traveled south to Jerusalem, where crucifixion awaits in just a few short days. He's talking to priests, elders, and Pharisees, and this is the third of three parables about the kingdom of heaven. Back in July, we heard another series of parables about the kingdom of heaven, from much earlier in Jesus' in the Gospel. Some of those parables offered warnings about judgment; this one does, too, and it is even harsher. It's hard to hear anything about it as heavenly. Of course, remember, this *is* a parable. It's not to be taken literally. It's purposely extreme in its rhetoric. It's supposed to get the listener thinking.

The usual approach is to read this parable allegorically. At this wedding banquet, the king is God and the bridegroom is Jesus. The guests who refuse the initial invitation are Jews who refuse to follow Jesus. The guests who accept the subsequent invitation are Jews and possibly gentiles who follow Jesus. The one thrown from the banquet is the follower of Jesus who doesn't muster up. His failure seems small, but his punishment is large. There is a lot to be disturbed by, including extreme violence to the implicit anti-Semitism. Even without that, this parable is uncomfortable, and it's difficult to soften: God is demanding, and the cost is steep to the individual who fails to meet those demands.

I think the tendency is to assume here that the parable is about the question of ultimate individual judgment and heaven or hell. But that may not be a necessary or even best understanding of what's going on. Throughout the gospels, Jesus's most consistent concern is with the community of people right in front of him. That's who he's working with; that what he's trying to improve on. As the kingdom of heaven becomes more fully realized, its benefits are visible and tangible. Apply this idea to ourselves, and it's not about getting into heaven; it's about realizing heaven in the world we occupy. As we show up prepared for the banquet—as we follow Jesus in word and deed—we become recipients of its benefits, as do our neighbors, because they spill beyond the boundaries we occupy. If we don't—well, we all know very well that outer darknesses exists right here on earth.

With that, we return to idols and idolatry. We hear the word *idolatry* batted around here and there. I've recently found myself using it with some regularity. Consider, for example, two defining issues of our time, race and the environment. I think it's fair to understand racism as popped up by the idolatry of Eurocentrism, and to understand anti-environmentalism as propped up by the idolatry of anthropocentrism. I could name others, but you get the idea. Even those massive structural idolatries are built from the very small building blocks that each of human being contributes with nary a notice. In all the wrong places, we look for love and safety and security and self-worth and ... the list goes on. Those false gods allow us to continue doing what we're doing, even if what we want to do is not good for our communities, and even when it is not good even for ourselves.

There's good news, because there's a real God, one who *is* creating, living, generous, and relational, one who has power independent of that which humans can assign. Perhaps today's readings are a call to full attention. That's how we understand those false gods for the empty husks they are. Together we rejoice, not in those false gods, but in the Lord our God, whose kingdom comes.

Notes

¹ Exodus 31:18, NRSV.

² Exodus 20:1-4, NRSV.