

The Golden Calf (and other Idols)

Exodus 32:1-24
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
July 26, 2009

As I was reading this story from Exodus, how many of you, honestly, pictured that great scene from Cecil B. DeMille's classic epic movie, *The Ten Commandments*? Can't you just picture Charlton Heston coming down the mountain holding two stone tablets, his gray beard flowing in the wind? And Edward G. Robinson whipping the Israelites into a frenzy as they all danced and partied around the Golden Calf that they had Aaron to forge for them?

Even though I know better, that movie is so ingrained into my consciousness that it's hard for me to hear any story about Moses without thinking that it happened just like in that movie. Such is the inherent danger in any biblical movie.

Not unlike that movie, however, the Old Testament author undoubtedly wanted to present this story as high drama. Just think about it. The Israelite people had just been delivered by their God from over 400 years of captivity and slavery in Egypt. God had just given Moses the Ten Commandments. And what do the people do? When they can't see the presence of God, and worry about the absence of their leader, Moses, they immediately break the second commandment which states (using proper King James English, of course), "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

As an interesting aside, however, did you notice that there's something a bit out-of-place in this storyline? The Israelites had not yet even been given the Ten Commandments, since Moses had not come down from the mountain yet with them. But that seems beside the point.

To this very day, the term "a golden calf" is applied to any idol that we worship, or put our trust in, or base our security on other than God.

As modern-day Presbyterians, most of us are probably not that well versed in the whole concept of idolatry. (And no, *American Idol* doesn't count.) So I did what all preachers do in the 21st century – I went to the Internet to do some research. For those of you who have access to a computer, get on a search engine, like google.com, and do a search on the word, "idolatry." The results are fascinating. I found over 3,650,000 web sites. And while I wish I could tell you that I explored each and every one, I looked at only a handful. Some of them were pretty scary.

My search revealed that there are a lot of folks out there that love to condemn others. (No big surprise there.) Many were critical of the Catholic Church for its use of statues and icons in its spiritual and worship practices. There were even some condemning the use of a cross, calling it a human-made image, thus breaking the Second Commandment.

I am among those, however, that believe that this commandment against worshiping graven images has become irrelevant today if taken literally. After all, we don't worship the cross as some sort of idol in the biblical sense – as somehow the

receptacle of the Divine presence – but rather see it is an important symbol that points to and expresses our understanding of God.

What, then, is idolatry in our day and time? Well, as you might have guessed, there were some web sites that were all too happy to provide a list of modern-day idols. Here are the most popular: money, possessions, pride, ambition, fame, other people, perfection, physical appearance, power, success, academic degrees, sports, career, alcohol, instant gratification, one's own opinion, even church programs and religion itself. Whew!

Now, we're all smart enough to know that **basically no one actually worships any of these things as if they embodied, or actually were the Divine. However, there's no doubt that at times we may turn our devotion to, or have an excessive attachment to these or other things instead of to God.** I found a comment I particularly liked on the web site of a United Church of Christ (UCC) congregation in Ohio. In a sermon posted by the pastor, he writes:

I believe that we all have 'golden calves.' They aren't objects. They are 'images,' i.e., the image of being successful, the image of appearing beautiful, the image of being happy. And when we do not aspire to those images we live as though God has abandoned us, just as the Israelites believed God had abandoned them.

That's why the Israelites made the golden calf in the first place, because they thought that their invisible God was not present with them. **So perhaps that's how we might define idolatry for us today: any time we lose faith and trust that God is with us, therefore turning to something else to put our trust in, or to use as a security blanket.** Speaking of security blankets, I'm sure you remember the wonderful cartoon character Linus in the Charlie Brown comic strip. Linus reflects a very real part about human nature, that a security blanket is often the most difficult of all things to let go of.

So I guess it is time to ask some of those tough questions. Like, do you tend to forget from time to time that God is always with you? What are your security blankets and golden calves? What are the things in your life that you're afraid to let go of, including certain behaviors and attitudes, even if you know them to be harmful to yourself or others?

This would be a good safe place to end this sermon, except for one very serious matter that I feel needs to be addressed. What I am about to say may sound shocking, perhaps even scandalous to some, but you're probably getting used to that by now.

If I were to pick the one thing that is in the greatest danger of becoming a true idol, in the biblical sense, I'd say it is the Bible itself. There is strong evidence that an enormous number of people in this country today **worship the Bible more than the living God to whom the Bible points**, and I would add in all fairness, many probably aren't even aware that this is what they are doing. Many of these folks claim that the Bible is "The Word of God," by which they mean it was not only inspired by God (as Presbyterians rightfully believe), but also dictated word-for-word by God, claiming it is therefore infallible and inerrant and detached from the cultural setting in which it was written.

This view of the Bible has had profound consequences. In the past, **horrific abuses have been perpetrated because of the literal interpretation of the Word of God.** People accused of sorcery were burned at the stake because the Bible says in Exodus

22:18, "Thou shalt not allow a witch to live" (KJV). Scientists were threatened with beheading when they taught the earth rotated around the sun, in clear contradiction to the scriptural understanding of the structure of the universe. Slavery has been supported, interracial marriage was forbidden, oppression of women has long been encouraged, and atrocities were and are perpetrated against the Jews because some say the Bible implies that it's okay to do so.

And our most current and heated debate, of course, is whether to understand homosexuality as an abomination to God, or rather, as many of us now believe, as simply an abomination to the heterosexual men who wrote those words, filtering the issue through their own bias and cultural prejudice, as most folks have already claimed about the previous mentioned issues.

To help make my point about turning the Bible into an idol, let me give you a recent example within our own denomination. I want to make reference to the **"fidelity and chastity" clause** in the *Presbyterian Book of Order*, as I did just last week in a sermon on sexual ethics. I want to draw your attention to another part of that clause.

The current law states, "Those who are called to office in the church are to **lead a life in obedience to Scripture...**" The proposed amendment to change the language, that recently failed, would have changed that part of the church law to read, "Those who are called to ordained service in the church...pledge themselves to **live lives obedient to Jesus Christ** the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures..."

Do you see the remarkable difference and implications between those two statements? One says we should live our lives in obedience to the words that have been written about God and Jesus, the other in obedience to God and Christ themselves. One, obedience to a book, the other, obedience to the living God.

That difference alone, irrespective of the debate about the sexuality issues involved, is in my opinion the primary reason why that amendment to change the current language should have passed. Maybe next time – and there *will* be a next time.

So how should we approach and understand the Bible? Here are some suggestions. From a broader perspective, **those of us who call ourselves progressive Christians reject the purely literal understanding of biblical interpretation, and the authoritarian position that derives from such a literal interpretation.**

Instead, even though we respect the authority of Scripture, we primarily approach the Bible as the book of the Church – the God-inspired collection of writings by people of faith for people of faith, or to act as a guide to help lead people to faith.

We need to use the Bible, through the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, to inform our faith, to direct our path (including when it needs correction), to inspire us to seek the presence of God in our lives, and to put into practice the will of God - which is to love God and to love our neighbors and ourselves.

In this view, the Bible isn't treated as a book that presents scientific fact. It is not even seen as a documentary account of literal ancient Judeo-Christian history. And although I would assert that the Bible *contains* the Word of God, I do so without assenting that everything in the Bible is necessarily inerrant and infallible. Why do I say that? Because, I believe that the words found in the Bible were written by human beings, inspired as they may have been by God. And that understanding, by the way, is not a radical statement, but is the traditional Presbyterian understanding of how the scriptures were written.

The Bible, then, should be revered as a sacred collection of books, poems, hymns, gospels, and letters that reveal God's relationship with humanity and creation, and calls us to a loving relationship with God, with each other, and with all of God's creation.

So let us continue to worship not anything that could be considered an idol, but rather worship the living and ever-present God to which the Bible gives witness, the God who doesn't break covenant with us, the God who opts not for condemnation, but for grace. And in those areas of our lives that could indeed be described as idolatry, let us pray that God will help us find release, and bring healing and wholeness in and to our lives.

Amen.