

PENTECOST 20

Proper 23 - Year A

This Bible study was written by Justin Smith of Virginia Theological Seminary.

Exodus 32:1-14

32 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 these from them, formed them 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 a 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.

Commentary from Tim Hamlin

The Golden Calf account is one of those stories that anyone familiar with the Bible knows – or at least, claims to know! This near-ubiquitous familiarity may be due in part to the many pop culture references made to this story – or it may be due to the drama and striking imagery in the story itself. Whatever the cause, the Golden Calf is fixed in the minds of many modern readers as the emblematic example of idolatry. Moreover, the same evidently holds true for the Biblical authors, as this cautionary tale gets retold several times in the Bible.

While such familiarity is not a bad thing, if we approach this story believing that we know it already, we risk overlooking key insights. For example, do the Israelites really commit idolatry by worshipping the Golden Calf *instead* of God? After fashioning the calf, the people identify it as their “gods” who saved them from slavery, and Aaron proclaims that the next day will be a festival, not to the calf, but “to the Lord!” The Hebrew text clarifies these statements further. In the first place, the Israelites identify the calf using a form of the word *Elohim* – which literally means “gods,” but stands regularly as a type of title or pseudonym for God. Aaron’s proclamation is even clearer: rather than using the pseudonym *Elohim*, Aaron refers to God explicitly as YHWH, leaving no doubt as to whose festival Israel will soon observe.

It doesn’t seem that the Israelites worship the Golden Calf *instead* of God, as a replacement or usurper. Rather, the Israelites worship the Golden Calf *as though it were* God, thus conflating their creation with their Creator. In doing so, the Israelites remind us that idolatry is not always as easy to identify as a gleaming Golden Calf. Rather, idolatry often occurs as a case of mistaken identity, in which things that are *not* God are valued and revered *as though they were* God. It’s all too easy to pursue our goals and desires as if they were the goals and desires of God. Perhaps this story can invite us to reevaluate our assumptions and reexamine the familiar contours of our faith. Such work is challenging but vital if we are to discern where we are truly serving God and where we are only serving our idols.

Discussion Questions

Is there anything in your life that acts or has acted as a type of idol?

How do you think the Israelites could have confused the Golden Calf for God?

Why do you think God finally decided not to “bring disaster” on the Israelites?

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

¹ Hallelujah!

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, *
for his mercy endures for ever.

² Who can declare the mighty acts of the Lord *
or show forth all his praise?

³ Happy are those who act with justice *
and always do what is right!

⁴ Remember me, O Lord, with the favor you have
for your people, *
and visit me with your saving help;

⁵ That I may see the prosperity of your elect
and be glad with the gladness of your
people, *
that I may glory with your inheritance.

⁶ We have sinned as our forebears did; *
we have done wrong and dealt wickedly.

¹⁹ Israel made a bull-calf at Horeb *
and worshiped a molten image;

²⁰ And so they exchanged their Glory *
for the image of an ox that feeds on grass.

²¹ They forgot God their Savior, *
who had done great things in Egypt,

²² Wonderful deeds in the land of Ham, *
and fearful things at the Red Sea.

²³ So he would have destroyed them,
had not Moses his chosen stood before
him in the breach, *
to turn away his wrath from consuming
them.

Commentary from Tim Hamlin

Like Psalm 105 before it, Psalm 106 is a retelling of key Biblical events, with the primary difference that, while Psalm 105 marvels at God's work on behalf of Israel, Psalm 106 laments Israel's inability to worship God accordingly. As such, the psalm has a somber, sober tone, with the psalmist alternating between lines of praise and petition aimed at the Lord. The core theme of the Psalm appears in v. 6: "We have sinned as our forebears did; we have done wrong and dealt wickedly." This follows from the previous verses, wherein the psalmist lauds God's mercy and forbearance while seeking God's saving help.

Yet the question remains: *How* have we sinned as our forebears did? As an explanation, the psalmist retells the Golden Calf story. The root of Israel's idolatry in that story, according to the Psalmist, was that "they forgot God their Savior" and God's "wonderful deeds." This tendency to forget and stray from God is likely the same sin that the psalmist sees at work in their own time; hence, their motivation for retelling Israel's past transgressions, so that their people might remember and turn back to God. We also are susceptible to sin and prone to forget, and so the psalmist's message applies to our time, too. Prayer and ministry are easily forgotten amid our bustling lives, as are love of God and neighbor. In response, the psalmist urges us to remember God as best we can and to rejoice in the mercy and long-suffering love of the God who remembers us even if we do not remember God.

Discussion Questions

Can you think of a time when it was hard to remember God? Why was that?

Can you think of a time when it was easy to remember God? Why was that?

Can you think of any daily practices that might help you better remember God?

Philippians 4:1-9

¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my coworkers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

Commentary from Tim Hamlin

This reading begins the conclusion of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul has tried his best to attend to the concerns and quiet the anxieties of the Christian community in Philippi. The only thing left to do is recapitulate his points, give thanks for his beloved friends, and bid them farewell. Yet, before Paul can get to that conclusion, he has one final conflict to address.

The conflict centers around Euodia and Syntyche, two highly respected leaders in Philippi who have fallen into conflict. The nature of their disagreement remains unknown, but the impact of their quarrel on their community was so great that it prompted Paul to respond. Thus, Paul urges the two "to be of the same mind in the Lord" – the same exhortation delivered to the community at large earlier in the letter (cf. Philippians 2:2). In effect, Paul wants the women to remember their commitment to the work of the gospel and pursue their shared purpose in love and unity. The community has a role, too, and must help its leaders reconcile their differences for the sake of the Gospel.

It comes as no surprise that personal quarrels and disagreements can get in the way of a larger, shared goal – even in the church! Longstanding ministries can be undone by conflict over direction and leadership; programs can be shelved indefinitely for lack of agreement over funding and management; and sometimes, small conflicts between persons can spiral out, becoming so large that they threaten the health of the whole community. In all such cases, we have two options. We can serve only our own interests, making idols of our egos, or we can remember our baptismal commitments to God and to each another and strive together toward mutual reconciliation for the sake of the good work.

Discussion Questions

Have you ever seen or experienced a significant conflict at church?

Did you do anything to help resolve the conflict? If so, what did you do?

How might you advise others facing similar conflicts in their congregations?

Matthew 22:1-14

22 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Commentary from Tim Hamlin

It’s possible that today’s Gospel will make many people feel very uncomfortable. Part of that discomfort likely stems from more general discomfort with the violent images present in the text, while part might come from discomfort with its driving theme: Judgment. Judgment can be a sensitive topic, especially in religious spaces, in which so many people feel or have felt judged and condemned in one way or another. For some, mention of judgment opens old wounds and dredges up painful memories, while for others it activates anxieties about personal purity and worthiness. In short, talking about judgment can be challenging; and yet, despite the challenge, reflecting on today’s parable means reflecting on judgment. We can start by analyzing the parable. Who is doing the judging? Clearly, the king judges everyone around him, but who does the king represent? The apparent answer is God; after all, God is often described as sitting in judgment over the world. What about those being judged? The initial guests represent opponents of the Early Church as the gospel writer saw them, while the later guests represent anyone who responds positively to the gospel message. These later guests represent all Christians, and their bright

wedding robes are the “[robes] of righteousness” gained from lives of love lived in harmony with Jesus’ teachings (cf. Isaiah 61:10). Within this context, the man with no robe is like a Christian without love, and the judgment passed on him is a warning to live according to Jesus’ teachings by loving God and loving neighbor.

All that said, knowing what the parable is about does little to mollify its more extreme elements. The king’s judgments still bring death, destruction, and damnation, all of which pose the question: Is the kingdom of heaven really built on judgments such as these? Here it helps to reflect on the motivation behind the parable. The parable’s original audience was the gospel writer’s own community of early Christians. The original motivation behind the parable was probably not to terrorize or discourage that community, but to exhort and galvanize them. To that end, the parable has much in common with the other readings for today. It, too, is a cautionary tale meant to remind its readers and listeners of a vital truth. The vital truth in this parable is that following Jesus and living into his teachings requires significant determination and careful discernment: Determination, to continue loving even when loving is hard; and discernment, to determine whether we are living our lives in harmony with the gospel message, or whether we have gotten lost along the way and need to get back on track.

Discussion Questions

How does reading or hearing this parable make you feel?

Does this parable encourage you to practice Jesus’ teachings? Why or why not?

Do you think that others would be encouraged by this parable? Why or why not?