

"The Beautiful Golden Calf!"

"Rudderless?"

Exodus 31:18-32:14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Matthew 22:1-14

As I was getting ready this morning and putting on my aftershave, something vitally important came to mind about what is referred to as the Golden Calf Incident. That fateful event was not simply about worshiping a golden calf object of worship, but was in fact a full repudiation of God himself and everything the LORD stood for. If we understand the time line, Moses was up on the mountain with the LORD. The LORD was inscribing the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone, indicating the permanence and irrevocability of God's law. I suddenly remembered a crucial aspect of the Decalogue [the term meaning 10 laws]. It is somewhat misleading to think of the Decalogue merely in terms of 10 commandments. In the aggregate and more importantly, they were a single, comprehensive framework for the whole of life. Do we understand the significance of this small but critically important detail? The Ten Commandments were in fact a single, comprehensive framework for the whole of life. All the others we find throughout the rest of the OT are derivative of those 10.

One key implication of this is that "idolatry" is anything that is contrary to God's person and God's will for our world is to be rejected. The LORD had previously given the Ten Commandments to the people verbally to get them started. He then took Moses up on the mountain to inscribe them personally and permanently "in stone." In that brief 40 day time span, that the people forgot the verbal words so quickly is a testament to the need to have them written down, and in a form that bespoke of permanence and inviolability - in stone, metaphorically and physically.

One critical take away from this, and the central proposition of this sermon, is that anytime God's people, of any day and age, forsake the framework for life on earth that God has given us, that is idolatry. When a nation and people that God has established and founded turns away from the framework for life God has given us, that is idolatry. Looking to other ideologies and frameworks for life is to look away from what God has given us. Such a people stands squarely in the same place, and danger, as those in our OT lesson. Our Gospel lesson addresses the question of what the kingdom of heaven (in other places phrased as the kingdom of God, used interchangeably) is like. Our Gospel lesson speaks not only of the days to come when Israel, in various ways again became apostate, but also of the days to come where a certain man without the proper wedding clothes arrived, uninvited, to a wedding banquet. The day would come, we are told, when this fellow would be bound and thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be great weeping and gnashing of teeth. The identity of this "man" we are not told. But we suspect that it is Satan. But we also wonder if it is those of this world who work against God's great plan for the kingdom of heaven. Let us not forget, now, that those who reject God's Ten Commandments fit into this category. This takes us now to the body of my sermon.

"What is so terribly wrong," someone might have asked that day, "about worshiping a beautiful golden calf?!" This question comes to mind as we

envision the people hearing for the first time the LORD's strenuous objection, as voiced through Moses, to the people's worship of what had to have been an incredibly beautiful and seductive object of worship. We should note that it surely was seen as "beautiful" in that it surely had a glistening and shimmering golden hue with the sun's rays bouncing brightly off the burnished surface. The use of the adjective "seductive" is proper because, in accordance with popular belief of that day, it was fashioned in the likeness of a young bull which, by nature of anatomy, analogy, symbolism, and popular usage, proudly and unabashedly expressed virility and strength. It is not a significant point of today's sermon but it does explain a small part of the larger story. We are told that the day after the completion of this mesmerizing object of worship, "the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." (Exodus 32:6, NIV) This suggests a sensuous scene rife with drunkenness and what we know to be improper and illicit sexual behavior. This has been the staple view of numerous movies, visual depictions, sermons, and Sunday School lessons.

But lest we digress, the ultimate point here is that the golden calf was an image of almost unimaginable seductive power, the power to draw a person not only into the grip of its salacious and delectable lure. And this not only, or merely, in terms of sex and drunkenness but more so in terms of intentional and formal worship, not all that different we might say, at least in one sense, from what we experience. Worship unavoidably involves the high veneration of something or Someone.

Having laid that groundwork, I want to relate a recent FB conversation I had, which I found to be surprising for the person involved follows and advocates most strenuously for so-called progressive values and norms. One day I found this person's post, reading, "Does anyone remember the days when 'IMMORAL' was just as serious, if not MORE serious, than [what is] 'illegal'?" "The loss of Morality is the saddest thing I've seen these last many years." "What happened to the Knowing that if it was immoral, it was just wrong? What happened to that? That's what we tried to teach our kids. 'Do what's right.' I'm so ashamed at what is being portrayed of this country right now. Ashamed to my core. I know so many folks that teach and live morality still. But I am fearful, fearful for my neighbors and friends, that we are being outnumbered."

It occurred to me that this precisely expresses the fear and concern of a great many concerned and orthodox Christians today. It took me by surprise that she, a very obvious progressive, took such a position.

In any event, I responded positively, hoping to turn her heart back to the Judao-Christian ethics and founding of our nation (which she pretty much rejects) saying, "In some of this you are spot on. Its root goes back to the 60's. The lack of moral standards is the logical, and unavoidable, consequence of everything becoming subjective. A given and culturally accepted set of standards internally establishes and enforces morality. Cast aside those standards and morality, that is, what constitutes right and wrong, and any sense of morality ceases to exist. America has come into its era of 'Don't you tell me what is right and wrong. I will

decide for myself.' The crop is being harvested from the seeds that were sown then and continue to be sown today."

This conversation thus far, by virtue of its two parts, might have been between two very concerned traditional-value Christians, though I know it involved only one. Thus, in an attempt to enable my FB conversation partner to see things from a different perspective, I responded further, saying, "A question. Since standards for morality cannot exist without a framework, what framework would you propose? We either accept the necessity, and existence, of a particular and precise framework or we accept the absence of moral values." I was hoping that she would begin to see the necessity of the moral foundation our nation's culture and society was built on - most specifically the Ten Commandments and all that flows from them.

Genuinely trying to assess and then answer what I posed to her, she replied, "... so many possible frameworks are gone. Stable families. Dependable income with a living wage. Strong educational systems for all.... Honest and empathetic leadership." What this person didn't seem able to grasp and understand is that what she spoke to were particular outcomes, not foundational standards for ethics and morality. What I was getting at was that until recent decades our society's foundation for ethics and morality has been grounded in Judao-Christian ethics as laid out in the Bible. There is a tragic irony in that the very things she laments as having been lost - in her words, stable families, dependable income with a living wage, strong educational systems, and honest and empathetic leadership - have long been sought after, held in high esteem, and to some significant degree actually achieved by our Judao-Christian ethics and moral foundation. Sadly, it is the very loss of this foundation that has brought about the loss of things she so rightly laments. Even more sad and tragic, it is the very progressive ideas she holds so dear that has unavoidably led to these tragic losses. Even more sad yet, she can't seem to make the correlation. I was hoping that her eyes would begin to be opened.

I thought perhaps I could plant a few seeds that might one day sprout and come to maturity. Thus, I continued, "With some 50 years hind sight, the 1960's arguably had the strongest sense and form of education (not as measured in terms of information at hand and transmitted, but in terms of the institution). It wasn't perfect but things have gone down hill since then, and this due to the ideology evolving then and since: "What's true to you may not be true to me." The demise of the family you rightly speak to has its roots in the 1960's. I was in my adolescence and teens then. I saw some of the manifestations of the cultural change from objective truth to subjective truth, the switch from a more or less singular foundation for ethics and morality (however imperfectly adhered to) to the lack of one. If there had been a switch from one singular foundation to another singular foundation, today would be much different. But to slowly come to reject the former to [come to] the lack of one has ended in the ills (and many others) that you rightly lament."

This true story intersects with our OT lesson of the worship of the golden calf. Remember now that this was the emerging "people of God", in their infancy, the Israelites whom God had called for a special purpose. Actually, it was a dual

purpose, of which we spoke last week. The first purpose, which is our primary focus this morning, was for the LORD to have a people who would worship the LORD and the LORD alone - to the exclusion of any and all other gods of which they knew or which they fabricated.

Let us remember again that the LORD verbally gave Moses the Ten Commandments (as well as many others). This was in chapter 20. Moses thus conveyed them to the people. In chapter 24 Moses sets up his aid Aaron to watch over things while he, alone, goes up on the mountain as the LORD had summoned him. "Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights." (Exodus 24:18, NIV) Today our reading began, "When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God." (Exodus 24:18, NIV)

One of the questions raised by this time line is, "How did the people of God, however early in their history as God's people, forget, so soon, God's first and second Commandments? You shall worship no other gods and you shall make no idols to worship. How did this travesty come about? Why did they create the golden calf idol?"

One answer is found in what we talked about a few moments ago. The golden calf was a beautiful, seductive and mesmerizing thing. The virility connotation was not only about sexuality and all things sexual but also about power and strength. These things, separately or in the aggregate, draw people, seduce people into succumbing to things that stand opposed to what God has established. What is it that has drawn Americans away from the foundation on which we were founded?

In case it's not apparent, it's a matter of what is objective as opposed to what is subjective. God said you must do thus and such but you shall not do that and that. These are all about objective truths and objective directives. It was in the 1960's that the slow but inexorable transition from the objective to the subjective began to gain steam.

The very things my FB friend is today lamenting stems from that time of transition. American citizens increasingly began to challenge the things God said were taboo and began to stop doing what God told us to do. Over time these things began to be the new idols that became the entirely new and different foundation for ethics and morality. This time period, leading now to our present day, might rightly be said to be our "golden calf" incident or era. The fruit of the sexual revolution is too apparent to warrant any detailed description here. The fruit of this increasing disdain and rejection, begun in the '60's, for any institution, person, or policy that historically maintained some reasonable sense of law and order (however imperfectly done) is now upon us in many ways and places. My Bible has a heading that opens Exodus 32 which reads, "Breaking the law".

When the law of God, that is, the foundation upon which our nation was founded and upon which it rested heavily (again, however imperfectly), is cast aside for a very different foundation, one can only expect a very different outcome. FB is not a place where one can get, at least practically speaking, too theological or too dogmatic. We are cautioned to not get too preachy as it were.

My final questions to this person were for the simple purpose of getting her to consider and think about what it was that has historically provided for stability of families, the low rate of divorce and low rate of fatherless children, etc., etc. Also implied is the question of work and income generation whereby families were held together, fed, and provided for by working parents rather than governmental agencies.

The over all point of this is that America increasingly has set aside ethics established by God himself for ethics and morality that are derived from a very modern golden calf. Why has this happened? Because it has been crafted as something beautiful and alluring, something new and something as alluring and powerful as a virile bull calf to use the ancient metaphor.

Hopefully what follows is not a rabbit trail: I once wanted to purchase the last two Charolais bulls a neighbor had to sell. He offered them to me at a good price to clear his inventory. Yet, they would be only 11 months old when and if I turned them out with my herd. I expressed my concern whether they were old enough to service my herd. Ray Marker succinctly noted that they were as virile at 11 months as they would ever be. I can still hear him say, "If you don't want your cows bred, don't turn them out." The point is that virility and strength was a huge part of the seductive quality of the golden calf.

As you will have noticed, I gave my sermon a second title in the form of a question: "Rudderless?" I did this in two, but related, respects.

First, from our OT story one might think that the Israelites were rudderless during those long 40 days and 40 nights when Moses was on the mountain wherein God inscribed the Ten Commandments on the tablets of stone. In one sense, they were of course babes of the faith, barely a few months into life after their birth out of Egypt. Could they have been expected to remember, and then find themselves able to obey, those Commandments? Were they, in real life terms, actually rudderless? What I do know is that today we have no such excuse. We today have had a rudder guiding our ship - the very Judao-Christian foundation I've have been speaking about. It should occur to us that if God did not find this a reasonable excuse for the Israelites how much less is it an excuse for us. It is critical that we not only hang on to what remains but regain what has been lost. This is related to why I am sad about my progressive FB friend who rightfully laments what has been lost; it has been lost because of the very things for which she stands and advocates. We, today, are not rudderless after all. No society can be rudderless. Every human society finds its direction in life from some source that functions like a rudder functions for a ship.

This particular year in human history we, as a nation and our culture, find ourselves at a crossroads, especially as this year comes into its closing months. A beautiful golden calf has been put before us, that is an ideological foundation that is diametrically opposed to the foundation of ethics and morality upon which we were founded. My hope and prayer is that as a nation we do not fall for it. That's why we have a voice and opportunity to make our voices heard. God cares, and cares deeply, for our people and society no less than he did the Israelites.

Perhaps the most important point and application we may derive this morning from our Gospel lesson concerns the man who arrived at the banquet but who was not wearing wedding clothes. As this is a parable we cannot be certain of a single particular specific human individual Jesus had in mind. But what we do know is that without question it alludes at least to Satan. The kingdom of heaven is that which is in this world but which is a foretaste of the eternal kingdom to come. After a brief synopsis of Jewish history wherein all the prophets of old and various other faithful ones were killed because they told the people of God the truth over a variety of matters, God then sent his Son, Jesus, to invite the Gentiles, that is the non-Jews, to the banquet.

Satan indeed has invaded, and indeed is at work strenuously, in the Lord's present kingdom of heaven here on earth. This kingdom of course is not confined to America but is that which covers the whole world. But our focus today is America. Satan is hard at work, and has been hard at work, in our nation, getting our people to worship a variety of golden calves, all of which stand opposed to, and work against, the very foundational bricks of morals and ethics, foundational bricks of our laws and life together, foundational bricks upon which our nation was founded and which many of us have tried to keep mortared in place. This election season and beyond is a critical time for us to do our part in speaking up and speaking clearly. It is vitally important to not simply keep these bricks in place, or even bring back what we have long stood on and stood for but to improve on them as we go along. These next months are critically important to us as individuals and as a nation. Amen.