

Cow-Hardly
Exodus 32:10-14
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If you've heard me give a biblical character the benefit of the doubt once, you heard me do it a dozen times. It's a character flaw I guess, but I want to think the best of people. And I know how hard it is to follow God without screwing up once in a while. I mean, all the Biblical greats messed up at some point. But does Aaron, who has authored the biggest screw-up since Adam and Eve ate the apple, does Aaron deserve the benefit of the doubt? Let me try to make the case.

So let's review. Last week we took a quick look at the Ten Commandments, which God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai to give this newly liberated people a shape to their new freedom. And then God calls Moses up on the mountain for some additional law-giving, the finer points you could call them, that fill in the picture of how God's people are supposed to live together. But Moses lingers up there on the mountain, and the people down below begin to get a little restless. The guy with all the answers, this Moses guy with the direct line to God, seems to have abandoned them, and taken his God with him, and so they decide to move on without him. (Sort of like North Korea these days...) So they decide they will appeal to Aaron, Moses' brother who has been part of the leadership group, because maybe he can rustle up a god or two for them to keep the enterprise going.

OK, now imagine you are Aaron for a moment. Their request isn't entirely unreasonable. If God had got you that far, and left you high and dry, wouldn't you need another god to take you any further? Moses has left you in charge, trusted you, and now the whole thing looks like it might fall apart. It has been years in the making, and a lot of effort has gone into getting this far. And God isn't there for you, not like for Moses who always seems to have constant contact. No, the stakes are high, you are on your own, and you have to make a decision. So you go back to the basics. You ponder those Ten Commandments. And then you have an Aha! moment...

You remember that the Commandments contain that very strict admonition, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on earth below, or that is in the water under the earth." But you remember that this follows right after, "I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me" and so it seems to suggest to you that these prohibited idols are images of other gods. And so you think really hard about what you heard and you can't remember it explicitly stating that the idols you aren't supposed to make are ones of your own God, and that if you did, they would have to be idols of other gods, the Baals and the Astartes and Ras of the world. It does not say, explicitly, that you shall make no graphic representation of the God who led the Israelites out of Egypt. Pretty tricky, eh? And you remember that after the giving of the Ten Commandments, that God says, "You shall not make gods of

silver *alongside* me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.” And now you are sure you have found the perfect loophole, the magic bullet to satisfy both God and the people. You will make a statue, and you will let people believe it *is* God, because, well, they’ve never actually seen God, but it will be OK, because it will be an idol of your own God, and therefore, you won’t lead your people into worshipping other gods.

And when the calf pops out of the fire, which is what you will tell Moses happened if he ever comes back, when it pops out of the fire, and the people proclaim, “This is your god who brought you up out of the land of Egypt,” you think you have pulled it off. So you call for a feast and you decide to do what has already been authorized by God through Moses: to build an altar and to make burnt offerings. That’s what God said right after the Commandments were given. So, you are following the letter of the law, you are keeping the commandments. And you sleep well that night, knowing you have saved the day.

Now, imagine for a moment that you are God. I know that comes easy to some of you. So, you are God and you look down during a break in your conversation with Moses and you see what’s going on down there. And you take a look at that calf and you say to yourself, “A calf? A calf? They made me look like a baby cow? Now that is the insult of insults. For this, they shall surely die. I mean, they could at least have made me look better than that Egyptian god Anubis who was depicted with the body of a man and the head of a jackal, or with a lightning

bolt or a weapon in my hand or something, but a calf? I'm not even a bull in their eyes, just a calf. I clearly need to start over again." And then you say to Moses, "Go down at once. Your people whom you brought up out of Egypt have acted perversely." *Your* people, you say. You want to distance yourself from this mess. You gave it your best effort. You made it as clear as you could, or at least you thought you did. Maybe Moses didn't explain right. But whatever. What is done is done and now it is time to fix it. You think, "Wow, I can't believe I have to start all over *again* like I did with Noah! I can't use a flood, can I? How can I wipe out these people and start over again with Moses, who does seem to get it"

And then you hear that same Moses squeaking somewhere in your midst. And he reminds you that it would look really bad to the other nations if you appeared to be so easily turned from your own promises that you would wipe out this people and break your promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And he reminds you that it really was you who cared enough to bring them up out of the land of Egypt. And you think, well, maybe he has a point. Maybe I should take the high road and show them the difference between a pathetic golden calf and the very creator of the world. Between an inanimate object and a flexible, compassionate deity. Between something of false value, like gold, and infinite value, like grace. Between something they can make with their own hands, and the infinite "I am who I am." An idol? Hah! Give me a break.

Let me stop the drama there and say something about idols. We usually think of idols as competitors to God, as something in which we place our trust, kind of like another god. But that is not exactly what the Ten Commandments have in mind. An idol was an actual object, carved or poured or fabricated in some manner, that in some important way represented not what a god really looked like, but the god itself, that contained some essence or aspect of the god. In some cases, it was that the god resided in the object, or left some of its power in the object. Idols were more than religious art, more than ways to remember your god. They were thought to contain enough of the deity that they could be bowed down and worshiped in place of the actual deity. This way of thinking about an idol, in the Biblical sense, is talking about more than just a picture of what something looked like, which we could call an image, or a representation. The two words are related, but not identical, and this is why many church traditions have not prohibited depictions of God or Jesus as long as they don't cross that line and go from being art or inspiration to being mistaken for the thing they depict. In the case of the golden calf, the people wanted someone to lead them now that Moses seemed like he was never coming back, and so they asked for a god. The story seems to suggest that they believed Moses was their god, and now they wanted to replace him with another one. So, in a way, Moses was already for them something like an idol, an idol of God, and so Aaron just swaps him out for a golden calf.

So, Aaron made a misguided, but well-intentioned decision, God took theologically appropriate but over-the-top offense, and Moses speaks the truth and saves the day. Later on, the calf is destroyed, people are punished, and they all move on with life. So what's the lesson here? The lesson is that when it comes to idols, we human beings tend to mistake them for the real thing, and then they become the real thing, and then the real thing gets lost in translation. The problem is when people begin to mistaken the idol for the deity, when the small, tamable, handleable, portable thing takes on more significance than the grand, uncontrollable, liberating thing to which it is supposed to point. Maybe you've heard the saying, "Don't put God in a box." It is sort of like that. An idol imprisons the god it represents in wood or metal or stone, and that god has no power to lead people up out of the land of Egypt or anywhere else. If Moses had never come back, it wouldn't have taken Aaron and the rest very long to realize that the calf wasn't God. It wasn't going to keep providing manna and quail and water from the rock. It wasn't going to guide them with a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. It wasn't going to bring such fear into the hearts of their enemies that they would flee before it. But they would have had to learn all that the hard way, and maybe returning to being slaves, or worse. No, idols won't get you very far in the desert, or the twenty-first century, because they are not the real thing.

Maybe Jesus was speaking to this situation even in the first century when he says, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door

will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” An idol never opens the door. An idol never gives good things to those who ask.

There are images of other gods for sale everywhere, and I don't have a problem with you buying them or displaying them in your house. They shouldn't scare you in the least. They have no power, because you don't give them any power. They are not idols of gods you are going to worship. You are not going to bow down before them or confuse them with your God. And for tonight, I am not even going to mention the other gods we have set up for ourselves, and the carved or poured idols we have made of them, like that big bronze bull that sits near Wall Street in New York and kind of sums up our adoration of capitalism. Tonight, I am not going to mention the idols that we have made collectively as the Church, like our church buildings and our creeds, and even the Bible. No, for tonight, what I want you to worry about is yourself, your own image, because that is the raw material most likely to turn into a truly destructive idol, the kind Aaron made, the kind that reduces the awesome power of God to a toy we can pull around with a string.

I said earlier that an image is not the same thing as an idol, and that is important when we remember that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Way back there in Genesis, we are told that there is something divine imprinted in and on and through us that gives testimony to the God who created us. God made us this way; we didn't do it to ourselves. Everything else in all creation knows something about God because of us, because we were created in that image. And though that image is no longer perfect, it is still our responsibility to tend it, and cultivate it, and make it speak the truth it is intended to speak. We are something like God's art to the world, inspiring it and revealing something to it about the divine nature. But even though we could say there is something of the divine in each of us, what we can't say is that any one of us should be bowed down to and worshiped because of that. That is when we would cross that line, and would make our God-given image into a manmade idol.

In the news this week was the story of a pastor in Alabama who revealed to his congregation that not only did he have AIDS, but had slept with several members of the church, while knowing he had AIDS. And on top of that, he embezzled church funds and used drugs. And if that weren't enough of slandering the image of God in which he was made, now he is refusing to leave the church building even though he has been voted out as pastor. I think at some point, this man turned himself into an idol, because he has become mistaken with the God he claimed to serve, in his own mind for sure, but worse, in the minds of others who

think this is how our God operates. If the idol looks this way, how much more the god behind it? To be sure, we can't control what people think of us and our God, but we can be true to what our God is all about, and let people make their decisions on that basis. Your life speaks to the world about God. What are you saying?

The verse in Exodus says, "you shall not make *for* yourself an idol," but it probably should say, "You shall not make *of* yourself an idol" and by that I mean turn yourselves into idols of your own God. We are called to remain images of the living God. You see, an image gives the right impression. An idol gives the wrong one. An image points to God's possibilities. An idol limits them. An image says, "This is something of what God is like." An idol says, "This is God."

Yes, Aaron's golden calf was an idol and a capitulation to the desires of those around him, but I give him the benefit of the doubt because I know just how hard it is to be an image of God in a world seeking idols of God. And I take heart from this story that when we screw up, when we give in to the demands of others, when we are cowardly, even when we make idols, those idols don't have the last word. God has the last word. God has mercy. God has compassion. God can turn back from wrath and God can keep promises. And God can show steadfast love to a thousand generations. May God give us the strength in Jesus Christ to show that to the world. Amen.