

God's Faithfulness in our Unfaithfulness

"The human heart is a perpetual factory of idols." So said John Calvin, one of the great thinkers of the church. We human beings are constantly making things to worship. Instead of bowing before the true God of heaven and earth we take out our tools, measure, carve and mold gods of our own hands and bow down before them. To put it a little more lightly, Voltaire said "God made humanity in his image and ever since we have returned the favor." We take what we think about God and think that's the way God is.

This is one of the most famous stories about human idolatry. It is part of our series of sermons on God's faithfulness. Today's topic is that God is faithful despite human unfaithfulness, and this story shows this perfectly. If the human heart is indeed a perpetual factory of idols God is a perpetual dispenser of mercy. This story shows that the moment God's people receive God's law they are rising up in idolatry around a calf they've made with their hands—what a perfect snapshot of humanity. At the high point of divine and human intimacy with Moses on the mountain and smoke and fire around it we make our own god and say, hey, this is the one who brought us out of Egypt! The bible is absolutely clear eyed in its depiction of human sin. My favorite part of this tragic but beautiful story is this—notice the way God tries to shift responsibility for the people to Moses. He calls Israel "Your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt." Wait, God, wasn't that you? Hear this word.

Exodus 32:1-20

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 the gold from them, formed it into 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 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 God, 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 aside 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 them to by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendents like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendents, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people. 15 Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. 16 The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. 17 When

Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.”
18 But he said, “It is not the sound made by victors or the sound made by losers; it is the sound of revelers that I hear.” 19 As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. 20 He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

That’s the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Three points today, what this story says about us, what it says about God, and what it says about God and humanity together.

One, what this story says about us. It is easy to pick on someone else’s idols. I’ve never had shopping as an idol because I hate it. I get in and out as fast as I can, so it’s easy for me to fuss at Madison Avenue or outlet hounds or yard sale junkies. GK Chesterton said Times Square would be a marvel if only you couldn’t read. All these magnificent lights, surely they’re announcing something noble, but, no, it’s for hair removal. See, easy for me to do. Or cars, I run a car until it dies, don’t fix things that I don’t have to, easy for me to see a new Tesla and not look twice. Idols for me probably includes having a job that makes people at the high school reunion say eh, wow, that’s more than we expected from you. That’s an idol as dangerous as any other. But enough about my idols, let’s talk about yours, shall we?

¹When our story opens Moses is on top of Mt. Sinai receiving more of God’s law. The last time we have heard from the Israelites was when they received the ten commandments and the core of God’s law or Torah (teaching) for the first time.² Their unanimous response, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” Martin Luther, great Protestant reformer, guessed that Adam and Eve lasted maybe a few hours in the garden before they fell. You and I if we resolved to be as holy as possible after church would make it, what, a few minutes as well? Hours maybe? I know most of us judge ourselves this way. There are bad people out there: Al Qaeda, Miley Cyrus, head of our least favorite political party, Roy Williams, and then there’s us, basically good people. We’re not so bad are we? Scripture says something more serious. We blame ourselves on the curve and other people by the book.³ “No one is righteous, not even one,” St. Paul said. He was reading his Exodus. Or back in the Old Testament,⁴ the prophet Amos says this,

You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities.

Suddenly chosenness doesn’t seem like such a good deal, does it?

Why’d this happen? Why was Moses so out of sight, out of mind?⁵ “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.” Well remember the people are only recently liberated. They’re in an unfamiliar wilderness and their leader is gone 40 days and 40 nights

¹ 1. What’s this story teach us about humanity?

² Exodus 24:7 on screen plz

³ Romans 3:20 on screen plz.

⁴ Amos 3:2

⁵ Ex 32:1.

and they're afraid. Aaron is too. He has them yank off their earrings, he jams them into a mold,⁶ and makes a bull, a common symbol of virility and strength in that world. He praises the bull as a representative of the God who brought them out of Egypt. He appoints a festival. And they rise up to celebrate.⁷ The verb has sexual connotations, they rose up to play, in revelry, think a fraternity party gone bad here. What they do is they set up badly what God has set up well. They make their own religion. They're in a hurry. They demand offering instead of asking—they yank gold and take earrings. They set out the bull in plain sight whereas God sets up elaborate means to be seen or not on the mountain, in the tabernacle. And they substitute an impersonal object for a personal god.

Here's what happens when you try to stamp out religion. People build it back worse. Native Americans used to observe that white settlers carried their god in their pocket. Their pocket watch. They'd look at it and then rush off. Indians found this very strange. What would they think of how we engage our smart phones?! Various Stalinist states take away religion and end up worshiping the leader or country. We human beings are incurably religious. We'll worship either the true God or something we make up. And the true God is the only thing we can worship without killing ourselves or others.

Pretty grim right?⁸ And what we see about God looks grim too.⁹ "The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely.'" God won't even claim them as his people. They're Moses's. And he's hot. Angry. Furious. This is not how we imagine God. We imagine God calm, cool, collected. But that's Aristotle's god, the unmoved mover, another idol, not the God of the bible. The God of the bible is red-blooded, irascible, has a temper (this is good news for those of us with a temper). And God says, essentially, "I'll kill em! Lemme at em!" And he plans to start over with Moses like he once did with Noah.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." God is a jealous God. We may think of God like a regal judge in robes at the bench. But God is more like a lover. A jilted one. When he is spurned watch out.

But Moses holds him back. Gives an impassioned speech about why God shouldn't kill his people. He won't let God give away his people: ¹¹"Why does your wrath burn hot against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt?" He plays on God's vanity,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?'" Essentially Moses is like a bargainer in a middle eastern bazaar here, haggling with God, arguing with him, trying to cool him down. Later in the chapter Moses offers to be damned instead of God's people:¹³ "Forgive their sin, but if not, blot *me* out of the book you have written." And look what God does: God changes his mind. Literally, Hebrew says, God repents.¹⁴ "The Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people."

God's anger burns hot. But then God lets himself be reasoned with. Calmed down. Argued with. Again this is unlike our views of God. We see God as omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, he is all those omnis. But here God will also be reasoned with, talked off the ledge, talked into blessing his people once more. Moses

⁶ http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-r6QX9MAgihU/T0bGE2LotNI/AAAAAAAAAtI/FKDwmPVQI28/s1600/adoration_golden_calf_cph23140_hi.jpg

⁷ http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/01950/800px-GoldCalf_1950059b.jpg

⁸ 2. What's this story teach us about God?

⁹ Ex. 32:7 on screen.

¹⁰ Ex. 32:10.

¹¹ Ex. 32:11.

¹² Ex. 32:12

¹³ Ex 32:34 on screen

¹⁴ Ex. 32:14.

wrestles with God and wins and God changes his mind. God is not stubborn God is reasonable. Remember this when you pray, God is, can we put it this way? Open-minded. Moses says hey, you're good, you love these people, don't kill em, don't let the Egyptians crow over them, yo, chill out man. And God relents. And this is astonishing about God. Right here when his people thwart him, thumb their nose at him, as he's writing the law they're making their own gods and rising up to play, and God has mercy. What good is mercy if people aren't really in trouble? What good is a merciful God if occasionally he gets really angry and blasts us? But ¹⁵"justice triumphs over mercy."

I've told this story before because I never get tired of it. A woman was having visions of God. She's Catholic, so she tells her priest, who tells his bishop, and the bishop thinks he's got her. Ask her next she sees God to ask what sin I confessed at my last confession. Bishops don't confess to anyone other than God. So she calls bish up. I've seen God again. Really? Did you ask what sin I confessed at my last confession? I did, she said. Now he's getting nervous. Well what'd God say? God said, I forgot. God's mercy removes our sin as far as the east is from the west.

¹⁶What's this story say about God and humanity together? God is a God of justice. God will not tolerate our hurting one another and God will set the world right one day. Even God turning back from destroying his people doesn't mean there aren't consequences. If you keep reading the chapter many die and Moses grinds up the calf puts it in the water and makes everyone drink it. Yuck. One surprising thing in this story is the light it sheds on the church's leaders. Not just me, not just our staff, but all of us. Anyone who influences anybody else is a leader. And what's a leader do? Pleads with God for people. Begs God to help. Insists that God work good and not ill. But then look—Moses fails. He overreacts. He spleens. There is a very old tradition in the Jewish rabbis that says Moses has an anger problem. Early in his career he kills an Egyptian. Later he strikes the rock rather than speaking softly to it. Moses' anger keeps him from seeing the promised land, it's his tragic flaw. What's yours? What's mine? We see it here.¹⁷ After Moses talked God down he sees the people with his own eyes and smashes the commandments God lovingly carved with his own finger. He doesn't consult God on what to do, he just grinds up the gold and makes them drink it. Moses freaks out. My brother pointed out to me once the harshest thing you can say to someone is that they need to chill. Because it shows them they're out of control. Moses is here.

And isn't it good news God can use flawed people? Like me? Like you? Because flawed people are the only kind of people available.

God is faithful amidst our unfaithfulness. The prophet Hosea compares God to a faithful spouse to an unfaithful cheating partner. God hangs in there when no human would. A friend was asked to describe God once. She said God is like the woman who searches everywhere, every nook and cranny, never relents looking for us. Good story Jesus. God is someone who chooses a special people, his best, his own, sees them betray, burns hot, and then forgives, restores, renews. God is the one we know in Jesus, who takes sin seriously enough to go to the cross for it, and grace seriously enough to forgive his crucifiers.

Moses makes the people drink the dirt of their idols. It's a sort of anti-communion. The true God takes flesh, dies, rises, and makes himself available to us in bread and wine. This is real communion. One where God gives himself away to make us whole, teaching us to give ourselves away to make others whole. A few weeks back I tore off too big a piece for one of you and said, jokingly, you must really need forgiveness! The next person said, you better give me that whole loaf! Thanks be to God.

¹⁵ Jms 2:13.

¹⁶ 3. What's this story say about God and humanity together?

¹⁷ <http://www.godisclose.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Rembrandt-Moses.jpg>

