

Oct. 9, 2011

### WHO'S NUMBER ONE?

I can't say that I've noticed many golden statues of cows in our society today. However, there are a number of golden calves in the sense of priorities we put before God. Any time we say, "I'd be more active in church, but ...." whatever follows the "but" is our golden calf.

According to *Faith Communities Today*, the number one reason people give for missing Sunday worship is school and sports activities. This is followed closely by a conflict with work schedules. But according to Theologian Paul Tillich, whatever occupies our minds and determines our actions is our god.

There is certainly room in our lives for exercise, economic endeavors, school and job demands. But when we allow any of these to prevent a sincere worship of God, then we have allowed ourselves to become like the Israelites in today's scripture.

What surprised us more today hearing the lesson from Exodus: that God seemed ready to wipe the Israelites off the face of this planet, or that God seemed to change His mind after Moses pleads with God to not take this action?

God's fury shouldn't be a surprise when we consider what preceded this moment. Exodus is a story of exactly that: the exodus of the people of Israel from the land of Egypt where they have been slaves for many generations. Against all odds including their puny numbers and their lack of armed forces, the Israelites left Egypt because God was fighting their battle.

If there were any doubt, it should have evaporated at the shore of the Red Sea. There, the people realize that Pharaoh had changed his mind and is pursuing them with his entire army. But God responded by parting the Red Sea so they could walk across to safety on the other side. And

when Pharaoh's army tried to pursue them, God allowed the waters to close up around them. The Israelites were now free.

But within days, the memory of the miracle is overruled by practical needs. The Israelites begin to grumble that there was no bread – and God provided manna in the desert. They grumble that there was no water – and God provided water from a rock. They grumble that bread and water were the rations of a prisoner – and God provided meat in the form of quail.

And then, God provided the people with the 10 Commandments: rules by which to live with God and with neighbor. First on the list: You shall have no other gods before Yahweh, also known in our English as Jehovah. And second: No graven images or idols to represent God.

And just like that, the people violate the top 2 commandments. They're concerned that Moses' spiritual retreat is taking longer than they expected. They grumble to Moses' brother Aaron that they need some concrete god to be with them. And Aaron obliges by telling them to bring all of their gold to one site, and it is melted down and cast as a calf.

Later today, continue reading Exodus Chapter 32 to hear one of the best bad excuses in the entire Old Testament. When Moses confronts Aaron over his responsibility of creating this calf, Aaron's response in verses 23-24 is, "The people wanted an idol. I told them to take off their gold, I threw it into the fire and poof – this golden calf came out."

In light of behavior like this, it's no wonder God became fed up. The real surprise is why God didn't get fed up much earlier.

But as God prepares to erase them off the earth and begin anew with Moses, it is Moses who pleads on behalf of the Israelites. Moses says when the Egyptians hear that the Israelites perished in the wilderness, they can denounce the God the Israelites believed would protect them. And then, Moses reminds God of the mercy previously shown to Abraham, Isaac and

Jacob – mercy based on a covenant God created with these imperfect men that continued to the imperfect Israelites and continues today with us imperfect people who are not what we could be.

And reminded of His mercy, God changes His mind and chooses not to destroy the people. Moses returns to the people, smashes the tablet with the 10 Commandments, tells the people of their narrow escape, and they repent and confess their grief over their sins.

So what does this story mean to us today? First of all, God deservedly becomes aggravated whenever we choose to put something before God. Whether it is family, our finances, our time or anything else we value, nothing should be number one before God. And in fact, when we put God in first place, we find that our family, our finances, our time and everything else we value fits together better.

And the second thing is, pray – and pray expecting that it makes a difference. When we pray for that family member with cancer; when we pray for our job security; when we pray for something without knowing how it can change, believe it will because God will respond. Moses' prayers certainly changed God's mind, and we are every bit as human and able to speak to God. But in doing so, we need to make sure to model our prayers the same way Moses did.

Did you notice that Moses did not petition God on the basis of any of Moses' qualities? Moses didn't say, "God, I've followed you faithfully, so you owe me one?" Or, "Hey, I stood up to Pharaoh – I can certainly stand up to you!"

No, Moses doesn't base his prayer request on anything about himself; rather, he bases it on God's grace. God was merciful with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; therefore, Moses believes he can approach God and ask for mercy for the Israelites. When we take this approach, it is a confession that God and God alone is our roadmap or our GPS. We are lost without God.

And second, the fact that Moses was bold enough to speak to God underscores that there is no limit to what we can expect from a gracious God.

Many centuries ago, a Christian named Monica gave her son very careful teachings about God, faith and prayer. But when the son was in his teens, he renounced all she had taught him. By the time he was 20, the young man was an alcoholic and had an illegitimate son. In his book *Confessions*, he claimed that he never passed up an opportunity to sin in some way.

But the son also knew that his mother Monica prayed. She prayed through her son's sin and she prayed through his heresy. She prayed her son through his fight with God.

The prayers were not easy for Monica. She went to a bishop and asked him to speak to her son, hoping he would turn back to God. The bishop refused, because by then the son had quite a reputation as an orator and debater.

Monica could not be consoled, and she continued to beg the bishop. Day after day, she approached the bishop with the same request. Finally, wearied by her countless appeals, the bishop reportedly said to Monica, "Go, go! Leave me alone. Live on as you are living. It is not possible that the son of such tears should be lost."

The bishop was right. Eventually, the son – whose name was Augustine – changed his ways. And he changed the course of history. His works not only kept Christianity alive when the Roman Empire fell, they are still to this day the most widely read works of any author.

Never stop praying – and never stop believing that God cannot put aside His wrath when there is a chance to be merciful.