

***How Could You Want Any Other God?***

The lesson set before us today – like our Gospel lesson – is one of those portions of Scripture which at first glance might seem a bit hard to hear and difficult to explain. In our Gospel lesson Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the one at whose birth the angels sang “Peace on earth, good will toward man” claims he’s not come to bring peace but a sword, and that one’s relationship with him may very well create tension and even division in what otherwise would be our closest relationships.

But many of you have experienced just that. Not because you’ve wanted it that way, but because some of those near and dear to you have chosen to reject Christ and his grace, and that unbelief has driven a wedge between them and you.

This infamous account from the book of Exodus also at first may seem difficult to account for – the slaughter of 3000 people; people whose only crime was worshipping a false god. It’s certainly not the first account in the Bible we’d take a person to introduce them to the Lord. Probably not the best Friendship Sunday or Christmas Eve sermon text. But with a closer look at this lesson and its context, even this account will leave you asking yourself, “How could I possibly want any other God?”

To understand the context of this account, let’s go all the way back to Exodus chapter 20, where the LORD issues the Ten Commandments. The first of those commandments was: “You shall have no other gods.” And to that first commandment was added this particular prohibition: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I am the LORD your God” (Exodus 20:4-5).

After receiving the rest of the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel said: “We will do everything the LORD has said.” And we have every reason to believe they meant it. They had come to truly love and appreciate the LORD God. He’d done so much for them in the months prior . . . rescuing them from their slavery in Egypt, sparing them the misery of the plagues that had devastated the rest of Egypt leading up to their rescue, providing food and water for them in the otherwise very inhospitable and uninhabitable wilderness of the Sinai Desert, and now leading them well on their way to the Promised Land. “The LORD is our God. Certainly, we will do everything the LORD has said.”

Well, that had been only 40 days prior to our account. Moses had gone up to get the rest of the law personally from the LORD on the top of Mount Sinai. But how short-lived was the Israelites’ awe and love for the LORD. The first verse of this chapter records: “When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.” So Aaron, Moses’ own brother, whom he’d left in charge and who was supposed to be the LORD’s high priest, gives in to the pressure and fashions a god in the form of a golden calf. (Perhaps much like the Egyptian god, Apis, which was a bull-calf – the god of sex and strength.) And says, “This is your god, Israel. Here’s the one who brought you out of Egypt.” And the people go wild like a bunch of heathens worshipping this image of a cow with pagan revelry.

Psalm 106 reflects on this tragic incident in Israel's history: "At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal. They exchanged their Glory (the LORD) for an image of a bull, which eats grass. They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt" (106:19-21).

So now Moses comes down from the mountain. And although he'd been warned by the LORD what the people were doing, when he saw it with his own eyes, he was disgusted and enraged. How could they possibly do such a thing?!

In that rage he smashes the stone tablets on which the LORD himself had personally written out his covenant law and goes first to Aaron. Aaron is like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I didn't do it! I was just walking past the counter and this cookie jumped in my hand all by itself!" Verse 4 says: Aaron "took [the gold earrings the Israelites] handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool." And verse 5 says: Aaron "built an altar in front of the calf." But when he's caught, Aaron says to Moses: "Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" (vs.24) "I didn't do it! It just happened – all by itself!" Any of you parents heard that one before?

Then again, if you think about it, do we ever react the same way still to this day when caught in a sin by someone or even in response to our own conscience? "It's not my fault. I didn't mean it. It just happened." Something you did. Or perhaps something you said. "Oh . . . I didn't really mean it." As if that excuses our wrongdoing or gets us off the hook.

Did Moses let that excuse fly? Did the LORD? No. "You know full well what you were doing. And there are consequences for such idolatry and blatant disregard for the LORD and his law!" And we heard about that in our lesson . . . Moses destroying the so-called god and showing how weak and ridiculous their god was by forcing them to drink it. And then calling on the repentant – particularly the Levites – to carry out the LORD's justice by killing off a number of the unrepentant idolaters.

What was not a part of our lesson today, however, are the examples of God's mercy and grace. Earlier in this chapter, when the LORD – in his broken-heartedness – announced to Moses what was going on down at the bottom of the mountain, the LORD told Moses what the people deserved and what he could and should do to them – wipe out the entire nation in one foul swoop and start all over in building a nation through Moses. But he doesn't do that. In fact, he gives Moses a chance to intervene on behalf of the people. And Moses does. The verses immediately before our lesson read: "Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? . . . Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.<sup>13</sup> Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" <sup>14</sup>Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened." (vss.11-14)

Psalm 106, which I referred to before, says this: "So the LORD said he would destroy [the Israelites] had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them" (106:23).

Do you see the connection / the similarity between you and the Israelites first and then between Moses and Jesus? The Bible clearly says over and over again that because of our many violations of God's holy will we are "objects of his wrath." Every time we put someone or something ahead of God as a priority in our life; every time we choose our will or the will of a loved one over God's will for that moment; every time we make money or possessions or entertainment or our hobbies or sleep or even our family more important to us than God and his will and the worship of him, we – like the Israelites – have fashioned for ourselves a false god and honored and worshiped it over the LORD, the true God. And because of our evil behavior we deserve to be treated as God's enemies and punished accordingly – condemned to hell forever. And yet the gospel says that when we do sin "we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (I John 2:2). As our mediator, our intercessor, Jesus "bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors," Isaiah said. And the writer to the Hebrews says: "Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" / for us!

And that is what makes the LORD our true love . . . because he is our gracious, forgiving Savior-God. He deserves the best from us. He deserves us to love him with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. But time and again we fail to give him that love. And it's silly to expect God to be indifferent to that – that sin. He doesn't tolerate sin, because sin is destructive – destructive of ourselves, destructive of others, destructive of our relationship with him. But what the LORD our God does do is forgive us . . . for the sake of our mediator and Savior, Jesus Christ. He does not treat us as our sins deserve, but instead continues to surround us with his love, his compassion and his care. He remains faithful, even when we are faithless.

In Exodus chapter 34, just one chapter later, lest there be any doubt in the Israelites' minds that the LORD still loved them, he revealed his identity to Moses by saying: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (34:6-7).

No other god loves you like this! No other god cares for you – body and soul – like the LORD does. No other god offers and keeps such great promises as the LORD! How could you want any other god?

For these and countless other reasons, the LORD is your true love. Now, remain true to your true love.

You and I are constantly being bombarded with a host of decisions we need to make. Difficult choices in life. "Who do I love most? Whose will will I seek to obey? My children, who insist they don't want to go to church or Sunday School or the LORD, who insists I bring them up in the training and instruction of the LORD? My sinful self, which is bitter and wants to hold on to the grudge and make that person who hurt me suffer, or the LORD who is merciful and commands me to forgive that person and keep no record of wrongs? My unbelieving spouse or coworker, who loves to gossip and talk trash behind other people's backs, or the LORD who wants me to defend their reputations, speak well of them and take their words and actions in the kindest possible way? My pride, which insists that I always get my way and everyone bend to meet my will, or the LORD, who commands that I honor others above myself and put their interests above my own?"

Well, who do you love most? The LORD has proven that he is most worthy of your love. The LORD is – for that reason – your true love. So remain true to your true love. And how do we do that? How do we show love for the LORD? “This is love for God,” the Bible says, “obey his commands.”

For whose sake were the Ten Commandments given? For God’s sake? To keep us in control? No, they were given for our sake . . . to show us our sin and our need for a Savior and then – in response to his saving love - to give us an opportunity to express our love for him. The LORD doesn’t need us . . . we need him. He doesn’t need what we have to offer, we need what he has to offer . . . grace, forgiveness, peace, eternal life in heaven some day, and – in the meantime - direction for living our lives in a meaningful, beneficial, God-pleasing way.

The Apostle Paul was inspired to use this account (and a few others from this same period of Old Testament history) to encourage the Christians in Corinth to remain true to the LORD as their true love. In I Corinthians chapter 10 he wrote: “They all ate the same spiritual food <sup>4</sup> and drank the same spiritual drink [same as one another and the same as us]; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. <sup>6</sup> Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. <sup>7</sup> Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.” <sup>8</sup> We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.<sup>9</sup> We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. <sup>10</sup> And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. <sup>11</sup> These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.<sup>12</sup> So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”

It’s easy for us to sit here today and – with our spiritual noses in the air – sit in judgment and talk trash about the Israelites who were so foolish as to worship a golden calf. But were we to do that we’d be missing the whole point of God recording this in his Word for us. The LORD rather is issuing a warning. It’s far too easy for us to fall into the exact same sin; and we already fall prey to it far too often. Let us be sure to leave here this morning with awe in our hearts and a renewed love in our hearts for the LORD. Thanks be to God for his gracious, merciful and forgiving nature. Thanks be to God for Jesus!

Let us also be sure to leave here this morning with a renewed commitment to remaining true to our true love at all times in all things and expressing that love in the choices and decisions we make each and every day.

As you do so, keep in mind the words with which the Apostle Paul concluded this section to the Corinthians – words of promise from the LORD: “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (I Corinthians 10:13).

How could you want any other god? Amen.