

In the name of the God who gives all that we have and makes us all we are, Amen.

Every time we read this section of the Book of Exodus, I have two competing images in my mind. First there is the scene from Mel Brooks' film, *History of the World, Part I*, where Brooks, playing Moses, is coming down the mountain with three tablets. He gets near the bottom and says, "Hear me. Hear me. O pay heed. The Lord God, the great Jehovah hath given unto you these 15 ..." and then he drops one of the tablets and smashes it. Without hesitation, he looks down, and says, "These **10** commandments for all to obey." Then there's the image from the epic movie, *The Ten Commandments*, in which Charlton Heston, again as Moses, has just received the stone tablets from God. He comes down the mountain, finds the people with the golden calf idol and he hurls the tablets at the golden calf, causing an impressive explosion, with sparks and flames everywhere, and people fleeing for their lives. Neither of these scenes is exactly biblical, but frankly I prefer Mel Brooks.

What we really see when we read Exodus is, after Moses received the tablets with the commandments on them, he stayed on the mountain for about 40 days, having an extended conversation with God. During that time, the Israelites who were at the bottom of the mountain began to doubt Moses – which was anything but unusual. After a while they decided that either Moses really wasn't meeting with God and had run away, or God

wasn't going to let him come back. Either way, they *needed* a god to worship. So they talked Moses' brother Aaron (their priest) into casting a golden calf for them. The golden calf was an Egyptian god and this one was meant to be a visual representation of the God who had delivered them from Egypt, the God they couldn't understand because they had never *seen* this God. But there is something else behind the story of the calf, something that has much deeper meaning for us today.

You see, it's not just the Israelites. We *all* need a god to worship. Humans are born to worship. I've said before that the best description of this is: people are born with a hole in them. This hole is right in the middle of our souls. Every human being has to find something to fill that hole. Some people try to fill it with food or alcohol or drugs. Some become consumed by their work in an effort to ignore, if not fill the hole. Others find myriad different ways to try to respond to the hole. But those who follow the right course discover that that hole is shaped like God and can only be filled by worshiping the God who created them. Only in worship can they be made complete.

The Israelites in the Exodus story had recently experienced the power and provision of the one true God. After what they had seen and experienced in escaping Egypt and out in the wilderness, they should have been completely convinced of whom they should worship. But they failed to trust that God would continue to provide for and deliver them. Instead of trusting in this God they could not see, they fell back into the idol worship they had learned in Egypt. And because they had no idol handy, they took

their worldly wealth – the gold jewelry they had – and melted it down to *make* an object of worship. Then, for us a clear picture begins to emerge. The people failed to trust in and worship the God who created the universe and instead chose to worship the wealth of their previous life, in the form of a small, lifeless calf.

St. Augustine described what the Israelites did as, “disordered love,” or the love of the wrong objects in one’s life. Through Moses, God’s anger was expressed over this idol worship – this idolatry – the disordered love of something other than the one, true God. Moses let the people know that they had broken the first two – and most important of God’s commandments:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; *you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol*, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.<sup>1</sup>”

Exodus tells us that Moses burned the golden calf, then ground up the ashes, mixed them with water and made the people drink it. But Moses wasn’t through with them, he also had his faithful followers put more than 3,000 Israelites to the sword. *That’s* what happens when you refuse to follow the commandments regarding idolatry – discomfort and death. But thankfully that kind of idolatry doesn’t happen anymore. ... Right!

If we are honest with ourselves and don’t try to see ourselves as better – or more righteous – than we really are, we have to admit that there’s probably never been a more

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:1-2 (NRSV)

idolatrous generation of people than the one that currently inhabits earth, particularly Americans.

And the all-American idol, the one Americans worship above all others, is the same one that got the Israelites in trouble. Jesus used the Aramaic word, “mammon.” But no matter what word is used, the bottom line is that money is the number one idol in this country today. Did you know that Jesus talks about money more often than He does any other single topic? But it’s not just money. People don’t worship dollar bills – well some people do – but with most of us it is the entire system that we worship. The more money one has made, the higher the esteem in which we hold them. The bigger the bonus, the more intelligent and adept is the executive who “earns” it. The more profitable the business, the “better” it must be. When Warren Buffet or Bill Gates speaks, we pay attention. They’re the richest people in the country – they have made more money than we have – so we should pay attention to them.

People – good people – will tell you that they truly worship God, and then they’ll tell you how important it is for them to get back to what they were doing because it is going to result in making, or keeping more money. It is the entirety of the system of making, getting and keeping wealth that we worship, and it is idolatrous. Jesus said that it is impossible to serve both God and mammon, because you will always serve the one and resent the other. He knew whereof He spoke.

I am not advocating here that the answer to this nationwide idolatry is that everyone should give all their money to the poor (or better yet, the church) and literally take up their cross. Although I do believe that would work, I don't think it is necessarily what Jesus suggested. But I DO believe that we are called to reorder our priorities – just as Jesus told the Pharisees in today's parable. The God of all creation said, "I am the LORD your God, ...; you shall have no other gods before me." Jesus said, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."<sup>2</sup> Those statements are pretty plain. There's not much room to negotiate in there – God is to come first. And to make that happen, we must *trust* God. God led the children of Israel out of Egypt and delivered them to the promised land. During the journey, God provided for every need they had, all the way down to food and water. We need to trust that that same God is still here, with us.

Yesterday I heard this put about as well as it can be, by a newly married couple. The man and his wife have been struggling financially, just like so many others are today. He said that when they first got married, they were attending church regularly and his wife was interested in learning about the faith. They weren't making any more money then, but they got by in their own apartment and kept the bills paid. Then she got pregnant, got sick and they quit going to church. Now they live with her parents and he

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:30 (NRSV)

says there's never enough money. He recognizes a connection between worship and trust, between God's provision and scarcity.

We're now in one of the most potentially devastating economic meltdowns in history. It seems to me that this would be a perfect time to reorder our priorities and stop worshiping the system that got us into this mess, and instead begin worshiping the God who provides for our every need, if only we'll trust that it's so. You can either worry and fret over your 401k or you can continue to do your work well, and find ways to give of back – trusting in God's provision. Give it away in the name of God and you'll have all you need. Hold it all close to you and it'll slip through your fingers. Live to worship God and let everything else fall into place, or watch things crumble around you as you discover that your control is an illusion.

Worship a golden idol or worship the one who created gold. The choice is simple.

To paraphrase St. Paul, finally, beloved, ... Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ... (W)hatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ... And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.