

Getting Real

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“Getting Real” Pilgrim Church UCC, October 12, 2014 (Exodus 32:1-14)

Last week, we heard the Ten Commandments—ethical rules that can help guide our lives with God and each other and can truly be a gift. And what was the Second Commandment again? “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. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.”[1] And another one bites the dust.

What’s interesting about the story of the Golden Calf and people already violating God’s commandments is the peoples’ motivations. That’s our focus. You see, scholars disagree about whether the Golden Calf incident was actually about people creating and worshipping an idol or if people made an image of God to worship. I don’t know about you, but when I picture God—I don’t think of a cow. Blame it on my years on the farm, but I don’t even like cows, except to eat. Today we need to ask if this story is really about the worship of a false idol to distract from God or the worship of an image representing God that people hoped would connect them to God. It even matters today.

We’ve fought about this distinction in Christianity. In the Byzantine Empire, there was a major controversy in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries focused on the role of icons in Christian worship. Icons are typically flat-paneled paintings that depict holy figures—like Jesus, Mary, and various Saints. Icons are venerated, honored, respected, and prayed to as a way to connect to the Divine in some Christian traditions.

When I spent a few days at the Benedictine Monastery, we ended the fifth and final service of the day before an icon of Our Lady of Glastonbury—this is Glastonbury Abbey in Hingham, after all. All the monks would gather around in a semicircle before the icon and chant and bow before her. The Abbot would sprinkle all of us with holy water and we’d all go our separate ways into the night. It was an interesting experience to see the monks gathering around an icon to end the final worship service. Some of you who grew up with Roman Catholic backgrounds likely have a lot more experiences of icons and how they may be used in Christian worship.

In Byzantine times, the Iconoclasts were on one side of the icon controversy—saying that the worship of icons should be prohibited because nothing made by human beings should be worshiped. Moreover, Christ is so divine that you can’t depict him accurately and the Ten Commandments state that we should not worship images of God, so there you go. The Iconoclasts would have been horrified by those monks bowing before Our Lady of Glastonbury Abbey. On the other side of the debate were the Iconophiles, the lovers of icons, who insisted that these images were symbols of the Divine and helped people connect to Divinity through works made by human hands.

The Iconoclast Controversy got nasty, with some of the Byzantine Emperors even ordering their minions to go into churches and monasteries and destroy icons and other religious art. The Popes during these years strongly opposed Iconoclasm and made their position known—thus contributing to the worsening relationship between the East and West. This fighting about the veneration of icons helped facilitate the eventual Schism between Eastern and Western Christianity that has never been repaired. Though ironically enough, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians both venerate icons once again![2]

The Great Schism is more complicated than this, but the heated fights about using icons or other religious art in worship happened again in the Protestant Reformation pitting Protestants against Roman Catholics and each other. Look around us, and you can clearly see on what side New England Congregationalists fell when it came to images being used to worship God. Ever since that Second Commandment came onto the scene, people of God have fought about what it means to depict holiness—God, Jesus, Saints—and if we can ever do it and how are we using those images if we do?

Which brings us back to the question of peoples' motivations. Here's what we know—the Israelites separated themselves from their ancient contemporaries. Yahweh wasn't totally anthropomorphized—God was an All-Powerful Being. Biblical writers show instances where God has human emotions, like anger and jealousy, and yet God isn't mistaken for a human being in the Hebrew Bible. Let's remember that the Israelites were just in Egypt, where gods and goddesses were represented with statues and images and were often part human.

So the people of God knew that they were different from their neighbors and it was sometimes a struggle. The Hebrew Bible is full of this struggle—the Israelites' monotheistic religion being different from the religions of their neighbors, their diet was different, they marked their bodies differently, basically they had a completely different way they lived. So maybe the Golden Calf incident is one of those times when the Israelites try to be like their neighbors. Maybe this is simply people struggling with worshiping a God so ethereal and mysterious and hard to classify. Maybe they were hungry for a God they could understand better, so they made an image of a baby cow not necessarily to worship as a baby cow but as a way to get at God. There is debate here about the peoples' motivations for creating the icons of "gods" is what I'm saying.

Let's not hear these ancient stories and think that they have nothing to do with us. Today we worship so many things in our culture. We worship power, money, sex, fame, success, possessions, celebrities and athletes, you name it. We have our modern versions of Golden Cows we make with our own hands and bow down before in adoration. And yet it once again comes down to peoples' motivations. When we look around us, maybe we're longing for something to give us meaning. And sometimes we look to all the wrong places. We make idols and use them not to somehow get closer to truth or beauty or peace or God, but as a distraction from what we may be facing in our lives. Motivations—to distance ourselves or to connect ourselves to one another and to God?

The truly fascinating thing is that God has a habit of breaking through to us. God breaks through even using those idols we have created and bowed to and adored and worshiped! God doesn't leave us out there by ourselves worshiping things that don't connect us to God and each other and just hurt us in the end.

We're in an interesting season right now. Many Americans love football, college and professional, me included. And let's face it—we can use sports as a distraction—football, baseball, basketball, hockey, soccer, golf, tennis, and so many more sports. This year it's been harder to use football to divert our attentions from serious issues with all the bad news coming out of the NFL—child abuse, domestic violence, and reports that playing football takes a significant toll on one's body, we're talking permanent brain damage for retired NFL players.

So it was really something that during the recent Patriots and Bengals game the Patriots cheerleaders donned Bengals jerseys for #75, Devon Still whose young daughter is battling cancer in Cincinnati. The Pats had a tribute video to Leah Still and Robert Kraft donated \$25,000 to the Cincinnati Children's Hospital. Devon Still cried as he watched the video tribute

for his daughter and recounted how much it meant to him to have another team acknowledge that this fight his daughter is facing is about so much more than football for his family.[3]

This is how Golden Calves we set up in our world can actually be used to get to holiness and love. And if that's not God at work in the world, I don't know what is. The very idols that we may create to distract and distance ourselves can even point somehow, inexplicably and almost unbelievably back to God. God uses our idols to get to us. Some of us may be big football fans, some of us may even be Cincinnati Bengals fans. I won't hold that against you. But what matters about Devon and Leah Still's story is getting beyond the game, deeper than the game. It's about discovering what really matters.

Isn't that what we do here every Sunday? Gather as the Body of Christ to figure out what matters, to go deeper than the various games we play, to wrestle with meaning and the truths about God that can sustain us when the going gets rough, to get anchored and grounded when life tosses us about? For God is here, often waiting for us to be the ones to let go of the idols we create to get distance, and to face God wholeheartedly just as we are, to profoundly connect. To face God with no pretensions and distractions and diversions and to just be real, flawed and yet forgiven people that we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Exodus 20:4-5, NRSV.

[2] Judith G. Coffin, Robert C. Stacey, Robert E. Lerner, and Standish Meacham, Eds. *Western Civilizations*, Volume 1, 265.

[3] Richard Skinner, "Still Moved to Tears with Pats tribute; donation," October 6, 2014, <http://www.cincinnati.com/story/blogs/2014/10/06/still-moved-to-tears-wi...>