

# Sacred Cow

Exodus 32:1-14

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Not long after the Ten Commandments were given to the people of God making their way through the wilderness, they violated the first two of them. “Thou shall have no other gods before me,”<sup>1</sup> and “You shall not make for yourself an idol.”<sup>2</sup> It’s not pride, or lust, or injustice which are the deepest manifestations of sin, but idolatry. In the Bible, the primary form that sin takes is the topic of this morning’s text and sermon – idolatry. We may think this is a form of primitive religion and therefore not of much interest today but perhaps we should consider this narrative a little more carefully.

It is not easy for those of us who live in the 21st century to relate to those who were prone to worshipping animals like a golden calf. I can’t think of one such image in our culture, except perhaps for the bull on Wall Street in lower Manhattan representing the financial market. That might be an image of what the golden calf may have looked like, except gold of course. Now that I think of it, the bull may just be an idol for some; a symbol of wealth as the ultimate goal in life. We certainly have witnessed quite a number of investment gurus who have lost their way, their integrity, and pretty much everything else on their way to success. However, we know that Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and wealth.”<sup>3</sup> Idolatry can certainly take the form of wealth but there are perhaps more subtle forms as well. Let’s consider the story itself for clues.

Moses had gone missing. He “delayed to come down from the mountain” and the anxiety of waiting created uncertainty about leadership. Surrounded by the very real possibility of starvation, the absence of water, and death, the people asked Aaron, “. . . to make gods for us” because it is not good to be in the wilderness without gods. So Aaron demanded their gold jewelry and then fashioned the image of a calf, and told the people, “These are your gods. O Israel, who brought you up out of the land

1 Exodus 20

2 Deuteronomy 5

3 Matthew 6:24

of Egypt.” In fact, these are new and improved gods because they are tangible deities. You can actually get your hands on them and know where they are. They will not go missing, as Moses and God seem to. Theirs was a religion of anxiety. Rather than faith, they began trying to avoid what they feared. Never a good approach to life! If your religion only produces anxiety for you, then possibly you may be worshipping the wrong god too.

G.K. Chesterton once said, “When people don’t believe in God, they don’t then believe in nothing, they believe in anything,”<sup>4</sup> which is perhaps a timeless description of what happens when we exchange worship of the mystery of Almighty God for something else. The reason gold and silver play such an important role in the Bible’s description of idolatry is that they were material objects that delighted the eye. Their beauty gave pleasure and provided joy. Human beings have deep desires, strong yearnings, and great fears. Therein lies the root of idolatry. The human heart is of more importance than either the mind or the will. Of first importance is not what Israel thinks, but what it loves.<sup>5</sup> “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength.”<sup>6</sup> That is why this fall our congregational attention is directed toward *Renovation of the Heart*. It is what we love that causes so much disorder in life. St. Augustine rightly regarded sin as disordered love. To sin is to love anything other than God “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”<sup>7</sup> It is not to hate God, but simply to love God less than one loves other things.

Images of God are prohibited in the Bible. Any human attempt to depict God will be a misrepresentation. And any image will, itself, become the object of human trust, love, and devotion, leading to the worship of that which cannot give life. Anything on which your heart relies and depends -- that is really your God! That’s why a good test of where your faith is placed is how much anxiety you carry around about the future.

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4 Mulder, John M. *Our Life in God's Hands, Essays by Hugh T. Kerr*, The Westminster Press, 1979, p.79

5 I'm indebted to George Stroup for his article "Preaching Idols" found in *The Journal for Preachers*; Lent 2011 p.12-18

6 Deuteronomy 6:5

7 Willard, Dallas, *Renovation of the Heart*, NavPress, May 1, 2002

One of the ways the Bible talks about our relationship with God is using the example of marriage. We are called into faithful relationships and exclusive love-making with a partner in marriage. Like the covenant with God, marriage requires public promises made and kept. And not to keep the covenant evokes powerful emotions of jealousy and anger. In this narrative there are strong emotions expressed about the unfaithfulness of this act. While we know infidelity can create lots of problems, our eyes are still attracted to others who are beautiful. This fact has not been lost on the advertising industry. They know that the way to influence us is through the eyes using powerful images.

Have you seen that recent Cadillac commercial where a beautiful actress, Kate Walsh, in an alluring dress sits behind the wheel of the car at high speed, turns to the camera and says something like, "The real question, is when you turn on your car, does it return the favor?" Now our minds may say, "buying a car will likely not come with a hot woman," but the connection is made that you just might turn a few heads with the right car. Commercials play on the powerful reality of human sexuality, and influence behavior on some level of consciousness, creating a connection between their product and sexual desire. It must work. Look at how much is spent on commercials and advertising. If you think we are not influenced by what we see, consider the multi-billion dollar pornography industry. Today, there are more ways than ever before to get images in front of our eyes that have a powerful effect on our wants and desires. We may sit and watch professional athletes every weekend and dream of being one ourselves – or longing for the good old days when we almost were. We can fall in love with being young, spending our time and resources trying to look like we are still 25 years old; with face lifts, tummy tucks, lap bands, and even a little "gold and silver."

Churches can lose perspective too, and begin to worship the gift rather than the giver. With increasing beauty all around us in our facilities, we can misdirect our energies and think the Christian life is about keeping up the church buildings. The importance of what we are doing in addressing deferred maintenance at the church is only of

secondary importance, not primary. We are not creating a monument in our building program, but an instrument for the continuing ministry of our Lord, Jesus Christ. What matters most is not the renovation of the building but the renovation of our hearts, of what we love, of what we give ourselves to, of what we believe in our hearts will really save us.

“When people don’t believe in God, they don’t then believe in nothing, they believe in anything.” Like the people of God in the desert, we must learn to trust in God’s providence. It will set us free from all undue anxiety and care about life. We only delude ourselves when we try to take things into our own hands and elevate the stuff of life, the things of beauty, that which is attractive and desirable to the level of worship, thus giving ourselves to it and spending our resources on it in the hopes that it will produce within us the life we seek..

Let me give you a silly little example from my experience. My beautiful chromed-out Harley Davidson is a wonder to behold. I call it “rolling art” because attention has been given to every little detail. Once when I was staying at a resort for a family reunion, a man backing out of his parking space ran right over my motorcycle. Just about to leave for a vacation ride for several days, I was “fit to be tied.” I’m 6 ft 4 in. and 220 lbs but my little brother is 6 ft 6 in. and 320 lbs. When we knocked on that guy’s room, he was not prepared for what appeared before him in the doorway. He was all of 5 ft 3 in. I’m a pastor and my brother is a Major with the highway patrol. We could have thrown him across the hall but we didn’t. I was mad enough that I came close to loving my bike more than this stranger. We sometimes love things and use people, rather than the other way around. We talked, exchanged insurance information, etc. and the bike was repaired in time. I even added some additional chrome. The point is, sometimes the stuff that glitters becomes a distraction.

It seems to me there are at least four ways that we can avoid a religion of anxiety and encourage confidence in God’s providence. First and foremost is having an attitude

of gratitude. Give thanks to God in all circumstances. Wake up each morning and count your blessings and reflect on the day at its end, and give thanks. Secondly, be patient in adversity. When difficulties come, don't try to find some other more tangible gods to save you. Remember, "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength." Next, be free from anxiety. God does not give us a spirit of fear but of love. "Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" Trust God who clothes the flowers of the field and feeds the birds of the air. And finally, be generous with what you have been given. "Give and it will be given to you. For the measure you give will be the measure you receive." When we are generous in giving to others, we cut the nerve of anxiety about the future and celebrate what is possible today.

On the eve of the most disturbing and anxiety-producing events the disciples would ever experience, Jesus said this to them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. . . . Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

God may seem to go missing from time to time, but trust in his love for you. Believe in God and believe in Christ Jesus our Lord, and resist the temptation to find new and improved deities that are within your grasp and control. There is only one worthy of our worship. Amen.