

Sermons from Park Hill: October 12, 2008

Sermons from Park Hill Congregational UCC Denver, Colorado

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Exodus 32: 1-14
“The Golden Calf”

Have you ever heard the phrase, “They just want to throw more money at the problem?” It’s usually meant to insult those who believe that some public program needs more money to be effective. The implication is that if those in charge just knew how to better manage the money they already have, we wouldn’t have this problem.

It made me remember Cleveland. Cleveland had a really hard time passing school levies because the perception and reality of the system was that it was failing. When the gymnasium roof completely collapsed at South High School, thankfully with no one in it, voters acquiesced. But an operating levy? So class sizes continued to swell (40 in some rooms); fewer guidance counselors, textbooks... In 20 years the student

body has shrunk from 77,000 to 47,000 this year. With taxpayer-paid vouchers for Catholic and charter schools, the claim is made that the only students left in public schools have parents without enough initiative to get them out.

Only 34% of those who make it to 9th actually graduate from high school – the third worst in the country. And so the charge is made, no amount of money could fix something that dysfunctional. Why throw good money after bad? Marion Wright Edelman of the Children’s Defense Fund talks about the kindergarten to prison pipeline in some cities. Well, in Cleveland, according to the latest census, there are 2,900 students living in college dorms; and 2,700 living in prison cells. Could any amount of money make a difference? There are half-a-million complicating factors, but would money matter? Not thrown, but carefully, wisely, planned: Yes. More money is needed to solve some of the problems. You can’t decide that a fourth-grade boy isn’t going to make it to high school and stop trying.

Washington’s been throwing around a lot of money in the last few weeks, cleaning up problems created by the lifestyles of the rich and famous and politicians who think anything that makes more money is inherently good. However, is throwing yet more money at this problem going to make a difference? If we’re just trying to paper over the fundamental, foundational flaws of unrestrained greed, won’t we just go back to business as usual? Will more money solve this problem? For the sake of lost

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pensions and retiree savings, maybe; I don't know.

Moses was a day late coming back down from the mountain. Apparently, the Israelites were afraid something had happened to him. So, in an act of extreme impatience, the people demanded new gods. Yahweh, the God of Israel, their God, who had led them out of the house of Egypt, out of the bondage of slavery, through the sea, with water from a rock and daily manna from heaven – this God and Moses were a day late finishing up their business on Mt. Sinai. And the people are past just complaining, they are gripped with panic and fear, and demanding something drastic be done right now. And Aaron, Moses' brother, suggests that they just throw some money at the problem. We'll make a new god out of gold. Enough with this immortal, invisible God. No more God of Israel. We want the god of Paris Hilton – shiny and made of money; you know, worth something. Because, if something's not working out the way we want, if God is delayed in getting back to us, at least a god made out of gold makes a good accessory.

Rabbi Lazur Gurkow in *The Money Trap* said, "People of wealth are accustomed to having their every desire fulfilled and they learn to feel entitled. If they wanted a material god, then they felt entitled to one. Was there a problem? No worries, we'll throw money at it and the problem will surely disappear." Because, as we're taught, if you've got enough money, any problem can be solved – especially when the

problem is we feel abandoned and alone and insecure. Shopping is a cure for depression. The wealthy, however, aren't the only ones afflicted by "affluenza." TV evangelists couldn't raise enough money to build shiny new theme parks if they didn't promote the false god of material wealth to those without, creating desire. Now, I had never thought of the fleeing slaves as wealthy, but out of somewhere, they had a whole lot of gold with them. But no matter their economic status, both rich and poor alike fell for the bull – I mean, the calf.

So, the people made a god out of gold, *40 days* after receiving the commandment to not make false idols. God vowed, I am your God and you are my people... 40 days. And Moses was one day late. So, give us something better. We can trust in gold; God is more iffy. This is the most embarrassing episode in the whole history of the Israelites, assisted by Aaron, Moses' brother. What was he thinking?!

Yet Aaron is an easy target to blame. It sounds like he crumpled under the demands of the people. But Rabbi Gurkow makes a suggestion I would have never thought of. Maybe Aaron was testing them. There's no way these people are going to give up all their gold so they can make a god. He didn't seriously believe that these selfish people could possibly turn over their most precious possessions. He was bluffing. The problem is – the people believed him. They believed that their gold rings and earrings would make a great god. So he bluffed again. He formed them all together and created a golden

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calf and said, "These are your gods, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Surely the people would rebel against such a statement. They would find that assertion completely outrageous and come to their senses... But the allure of wealth and status.

They remembered back to their time in Egypt, and even though they had been slaves, they were still jealous of the gaudy Donald Trump gold-plated door knobs of the Pharaoh. What good is contemplating the mystery of God when you can have something made of gold to worship? So they were completely swept up in the delusion of the golden calf – to whom they now brought burnt offerings and sacrifices of well-being.

So maybe we can't be too hard on Aaron; he made a few bad judgments, trying to do the right thing. But the people are still fully at fault – right? Their behavior was outrageous.

Rabbi Zalman Posner questions this too. He asks, "Was this not a sincere religious quest for the divine?" Moses had brought them this far, but didn't they really need someone else to "go before them?" If they wanted to be respected by their new neighbors as they got closer to the promised land, they would need some more impressive gods. All their neighbors would have are gods carved in wood and stone. One made of gold would be intimidating. These were wealthy people, they'd think, so don't mess with them. And while we've been calling the Israelites selfish, didn't they immediately turn

over their gold to make the golden calf? They gave up their most precious possessions and brought generous offerings immediately when asked.

Perhaps even more, they were just looking for something that made more sense. They didn't know where they were going or when they would get there. How much more patience can they give? Weren't they trying to make their faith more tangible, more accessible? They were groping for answers to eternal questions by embracing something they understood. They still gave it worship, so they weren't completely into themselves. So they were being sincere, sacrificial, and generous. What more could you ask? Were they trying to escape God or were they simply seeking the god of their understanding? Which is a completely contemporary question.

I think many of us, including myself, consider ourselves seekers. But, what are we seeking? Are we trying to escape from responsibility? Are we looking for anything that would absolve us of accountability? Are we looking for something, anything, that would make no demands on us – even the demand that we act ethically and morally with each other?

Or are we seeking truth – even truth that hurts? Are we seeking deeper connections to other human beings even when it requires us to recognize that we have sinned against them? Are we seeking divine intervention for our 401K

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plan or for our marriage? I applaud those who seek the god of their understanding. Just make sure it's not the god you can control. Beware the golden calf that has to be paid for on your Visa or MasterCard.

There are some problems that need more money to address them; there are some problems that we better think about it before we give any more; and then there are problems that no amount of good money thrown at it will make a difference. These are the problems that call for divine inspiration and human cooperation.

Not surprisingly, God was royally ticked off. After everything they had been through together, the idea that the Israelites could so easily and quickly abandon their covenant – essentially, their marriage vows – angered God enough to call the whole thing off and start over with another people who would be more deserving. We too have been mad enough at times to want the other party destroyed – to wish the worst on them.

Moses had played a crucial role many times in the wandering life of Israel; but had he not risked his own life and reputation begging on behalf of the greedy, outrageously insulting Israelites, the beloved people would have ceased to exist.

Throughout time, empires have been destroyed by their greed and worship of gold-covered gods – not brought down by Yahweh but their own selfishness *and* disregard for the poor. Not surprisingly, the recent orgy of greed has been taking place at the same time as the division between rich and poor in this country has become wider than at any time in our nation's history. Given our behavior, that thought frightens me. At the altar of what God does our nation bow? At the altar of what God do we seek understanding? To what God do we give our allegiance?

The falling stock market shouldn't worry us more than the idea of fourth-graders abandoned to a future in prison. The fear of a stagnant housing market shouldn't induce more depression than the thought of those who have no home. Panicked selling on Wall Street isn't the same as the panicked mother hoping she has enough money for the food in her shopping cart.

Perhaps the Israelites reasoned that gold or other physical objects can't just get up and walk away. They don't disappear like Moses did; they aren't hidden behind a pillar of clouds like God. They were scared and felt alone. Or maybe they were just greedy. Perhaps Aaron had good intentions in telling the people to create a new god out of their jewelry. Or maybe he was symptomatic of leaders who wanted a cut from all that gold melted together.

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Either way, this is a cautionary tale. In times of fear, when we are feeling alone, when people just don't understand what we are going through, when we are most tempted to walk away from our covenants with someone we love, where do we turn? To something new and exciting, shiny and bright? Will more money solve this problem?

Or do we turn to the one who this morning gave us breath; the one who makes the sun shine and the rain fall; the one who formed the mountains and filled the oceans; the one who guides us through the wilderness and who will direct our path...

The Holy One, the God of Israel and our God, made known to us in acts of compassion between strangers; the Holy One, the God of Israel and our God, made known to us through the courage to stand for justice and peace; the Holy One, the God of Israel and our God, made known to us in patience for our loved ones; the Holy One, the God of Israel and our God, our strength, wisdom, and redeemer, the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The one who will not abandon us in our time of need.