

“No Bull”

Psalm 106; Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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We like it when our leaders lead us, as long as we agree with them.
We like it when our leaders appease us, as long as we agree with them.

Both statements are true and both are reflected in the story of the golden calf from Exodus 32 and this message, “No Bull.”

With the incessant drumbeat of television commercials, gubernatorial debates, and mid-term Congressional elections, the issue of temporal leadership is a remote control click away. We may lament whatever we wish to lament about our leaders and the state of politics in America in 2014, but Winston Churchill’s aphorism still rings true: “Democracy is the worst form of government ever invented, except for all the others.”

If you are becoming apprehensive about this being a “political” sermon, however we measure such things, please relax. It is rather a message about leadership and followership and, ultimately, about our relationship with God.

Moses led. If the story of the Israelites liberation from Egyptian slavery and nomadic wandering for two generations tells us nothing else, it tells us that they were led by a charismatic, God-focused leader. Moses had his God-encounter in the bush that was on fire but would not be consumed in Exodus 3. He then confronted Pharaoh, garnered the release of Hebrew slaves, got them to follow him to a yet-unreached “promised land” and, time after time when disaster loomed, called upon the God who had called on him to give the people what they needed in the nick of time: water from the rock, bread in the desert. While the people argued with Moses and gave him fits, they were also glad to be out from under the yoke of Egyptian slavery.

This same Moses was also such a lousy public speaker that he got his brother Aaron to do the talking for him. Aaron was a good spokesperson but in today’s reading we meet him in a time of crisis.

Moses has been gone a long time and the people are anxious without their leader. Moses was called up to the top of Mount Sinai to receive God's law. It wasn't just the Ten Commandments we read last week beginning at chapter 20. It is 12 chapters of laws covering everything from food laws to temple construction to priestly vestments and ordination. 12 chapters. 40 days. A long time. The people are getting anxious. "Where the heck is Moses? Has he left us? Is he dead?"

The people are anxious enough that they demand that Aaron make other gods for them. Aaron, surrounded by a mob, perhaps uneasy himself about his brother's whereabouts and certainly used to speaking for Moses and not himself, takes the easy way out. He appeases. "You want gods? I'll give you gods. Just fire me up a furnace that can run 1850 degrees Fahrenheit and we'll melt that Egyptian gold that you took when you left Egypt right into the prettiest little idol you ever did see."

It's easy enough to criticize, of course. Perhaps it all seems a bit primitive to us, even irrelevant. Aaron made a golden calf. So what? The calf was a symbol in the ancient Near East used by other religions, including Egyptians, to suggest the presence of the Deity. But not Judaism. So the calf represents both a backsliding toward a life of enslavement and a "no confidence" vote in God and his agent, Moses.

Here are several other "so what's" to consider:

- We have a Wesley Center full of folks who struggle with the golden calf of substance abuse. The twelve-step programs affirm that the journey toward sobriety begins with acknowledgement of a higher power "as we understand him" beyond the power of addiction. This affirmation is not just a bulwark against a physical craving and dependency, but a spiritual response to self-will (not free-will). Embracing the one God thwarts a self-will whose siren song is "I'm in charge."
- According to the credit analysis firm Experian, the average balance on credit cards that carry a balance was \$7,743 as of June, 2014. At a 21-24% interest rate on many cards, we struggle with the golden calf of debt.

- According to the Cornell University Chronicle, child abuse and neglect rise with income equality, although we know that abuse in all its forms—as several recent high profile National Football League cases make all too clear—is no respecter of age, income or education. We struggle with the golden calf of inequitable power.

Still, the Israelites appeared to enjoy their golden calf. Aaron declared a festival to the Lord and the people enjoyed it. Some commentators note that the party had the implication of naughtiness – since we have children present, you can figure it out – but either way the irony is unmistakable: while Moses is getting the straight story from God on the mountain, Aaron is giving the people bull in the valley.

God is having none of it: “Go down at once!” he says to Moses. Their spiritual conversation on the mountaintop comes to an abrupt halt. I recall one of our people talking about their return from a spiritual growth weekend and how jarring it was to re-enter life as it is from life as it should and can be. We can only imagine how disheartened Moses must have been in leaving the latter and entering the former.

This is where, for me, the story becomes the most interesting of all. God and Moses have a conversation, with God in the role of impatient, petulant yet all-powerful adolescent and Moses as the wizened dispenser of good counsel. “Now let me alone” God says to Moses. “Let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against [the people] and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

“Whoa, God” Moses replies in so many words. “Are you really going to do this and let the Egyptians and everyone else say that the God of Israel is just a two-timing lout that brought them out here to wipe them out? Is that what you want the nations saying about you? Remember your promises—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—to be with them and give them the land of promise.”

This story may rattle us: God sounding more like us and Moses sounding more like God. Anthropomorphism – describing God with human attributes – is a common technique of ancient religious writing.

Here's what I take from it: Moses, as the one God called, made two important decisions. First, he cared about his relationship **with God** enough to argue, to wrestle, to resist what he regarded as unfaithful, even when it came from God! This is a characteristic of Hebrew scripture that Christians might do well to imitate: care about our relationship with God enough to argue, to wrestle, to resist. Have you never argued with God? Never questioned the divine mind? Never once said, "God, why on earth would you let this happen?" Even if not, remember the baptismal promises we have made "to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever form they present themselves." A wise sage once said that the opposite of love is not hate, but apathy. I think a deep love for God is rooted, in part, in caring about our relationship enough to argue with God as Moses did.

Second, Moses cared about his relationship **with the people** enough to stand for them when it might have been easy to throw them under the bus. Not that Moses wasn't mad at them and Aaron. He was! Just read the rest of the story through the end of the chapter and you'll see how angry Moses was. But Moses resisted the easy temptation to act out his anger, kick someone when they are down and take personal advantage: in this case, to become God's special favorite instead of leading God's chosen people. Instead, Moses stayed loyal to the people God had called him to serve and—no surprise—the story ends with the narrator telling us "And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people."

Life is short. We need God. We need godly people who will lead us, not appease us, in and outside the church. We need, ourselves, to be those people who will step up when it's easy to step back. Whether one sees oneself as a "leader" or not, all of us are called to worship and serve God. We do it when we care enough to wrestle with God and when we care enough to put others before ourselves. When we do, we find the holy surprise in Paul's letter to the Philippians, "that the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." And that's no bull.