

April 10, 2019 – Exodus 32:1-14 & John 8:51-59

There's a funny scene in a movie that I've always remembered. A bunch of escaped convicts have taken over an airplane transporting them to another prison. They turn up the music and begin laughing and celebrating as the song "Sweet Home Alabama" begins playing. And at that point, one prisoner turns to another prisoner and says, "Define irony: a bunch of idiots dancing around on a plane to a song made famous by a band that died in a plane crash."

I thought of that quote as I read our Old Testament Lesson for today. Define irony: a bunch of idiots dancing around an idol at the very moment that God is condemning idolatry. That's what's going on here.

Moses is delayed from coming down the mountain because he is in the very midst of receiving the Ten Commandments. Which, of course, begin with that foundational commandment that shapes how we understand every other commandment: You shall have no other gods.

When Luther wrote his explanation of the First Commandment, he wrote, "We should fear, love, and trust God above all things." And then every other commandment after that begins by saying, "We should fear and love God that..."

Every single law of God begins with that fundamental premise that we have no other gods but Him alone. And breaking any law of God means that you've also violated that First Commandment. Because if you were willing to sin against the Lord, then it means you obviously either feared something more than Him, or loved something more than Him. But, either way, there was clearly another god – a false god – before Him.

But what's really interesting to me is the reason why these Israelites were worshipping this idol. They were worshipping it because they thought Moses had abandoned them. Not God. Moses. Which shows that there was already idolatry going on amongst the Israelites long before the golden calf was made.

Because they were idolizing Moses himself. They say to Aaron, "*Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.*"

Moses brought them up out of the land of Egypt? Um... no. The Lord – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – brought them out of the land of Egypt. Moses was merely a prophet. He was merely God's instrument.

But, for a people accustomed to calling their pharaoh a god, this was probably an easy mistake to make. They were used to worshipping men as gods. So Moses was just another god to them.

The same goes for Aaron. Aaron may have been responsible for the creation of this golden calf, but here again, he makes an understandable mistake. When the people see the golden calf, they say, "*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*"

But when Aaron hears that, he builds an altar before the calf and says, "*Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.*" Tomorrow shall be a feast to Yahweh. Tomorrow shall be a feast to the God of Israel. To the God who really did bring them up out of Egypt.

Aaron is trying to worship the Lord. But he's trying to worship him like he's a god of Egypt. Like he's a god who can be formed into a statue of gold and worshipped with eating and drinking and pagan pleasures. Like he's just another god amongst many gods. And he just happens to be the one who likes the descendants of Abraham.

For both Aaron and the rest of the Israelites, they were worshipping God based on their human notions of worship. Based on what the world around them had told them that worship should look like. Based on what the world around them had told them that God should look like.

It's a temptation we always have. To remake God in our own image. To define him in our own terms. To decide what pleases him in our own way.

And, in the process, make him that much easier to worship and obey. The Egyptian way of worshipping their gods was not just familiar to the Israelites. It was easier too.

For the price of a few gold earrings, they could please God. They could be good and faithful worshippers of a God who, based on everything they had experienced, was immensely powerful. And they'd get a nice party out of the deal as well. Who wouldn't want to worship God like that?

And, frankly, that sinful delusion has existed throughout the history of God's people. That we can just buy God's love with a little bit of gold. That we can just purchase an indulgence or two and get out of purgatory. That we can just put a little more in the offering plate and we'll control him. That we'll control his church.

I think, when you put it in those terms, it's pretty obvious how wrong that attitude is. But, if we needed it spelled out for us, we only have to look at what God did to the golden calf they had made. Do you know what happened to it?

After Moses came down from the mountain, he went and took the golden calf, had it ground up into dust, mixed it with their water, and then made the Israelites drink it. Now, there's nothing dangerous about gold dust. It's not at all poisonous. In fact, it's completely inert.

What this did do, though, was make it impossible to ever retrieve that gold for anything, ever again. That idol was obliterated. The very gold it was made of was turned to... well... I think you know where it ended up.

The truth is, God hates idolatry. And it's not just because he's a jealous God, like we talked about last week. Although that's true too. Even when Aaron was worshipping the golden calf because he thought it was the right way to worship the one true God, the Lord still hated it.

Why? Well, God hates idolatry because it's the exact opposite of what our relationship with Him should look like. To worship God like an idol is to have a relationship based on giving something to Him. Gold, money, devotion. Whatever. It's all about what we do for the idol. It's all about what we do for God.

But what was it that Moses said that convinced God to relent from his anger? That convinced him not to abandon the Israelites? Moses pointed to all that God had done for them. The oath that God had sworn to their fathers. The offspring that he had given them. The land that he had promised them. The deliverance from Egypt that he had provided to them.

If God abandoned them now, he would be known to the Egyptians as the God who gave up on his people. But if he stayed with them, he would be known as the God who keeps his promises and gives his people whatever they need.

And that is exactly the relationship that God wants with us. He wants us to worship him as the God who keeps his promises. As the God who gives us everything we need. He isn't an idol that we sacrifice to. He is the great I AM, who sacrifices everything for us.

That's the lesson that Jesus was trying to teach to the Pharisees in our Gospel lesson. The Pharisees thought they knew God. They thought they knew how to worship him. They said with complete honesty, "He is our God."

But they didn't know God at all. If they had known him, they would have seen him in Jesus. They would have seen him in everything Jesus said and did. They would have looked at Jesus and recognized the great I AM who was before the Prophets. Before Moses. Before Abraham himself.

They would have rejoiced that God had kept his promise and had come to save his people. They would have rejoiced to see Jesus lay down his life to forgive their sins. They would have rejoiced to see God sacrifice everything for us.

They didn't know God. But we do. Because we know the Son, we know the Father. Because we know Jesus, we know God. And because we have heard his word. Believed his word. Kept his word. We have his promise that we will never see death. Amen.