

Message Notes September 6th, 2020
“The Golden Calf: Old Testament Grace & Modern-Day Idolatry”
(Exodus 32:1-14)

- **Epic Fails**

- Last week, we wrapped up our summer series on the life of Jesus, *Beautiful Outlaw*. Next week, we’re starting a new series called *The Good and Beautiful Community* where we’re going to explore what it really means to *be* the Body of Christ, what it means to *live out* this calling to be followers of this “beautiful outlaw.” But today, we’re making a pit-stop in the Old Testament, looking at a story from Exodus.
 - I love the Old Testament. Those people who say that the New Testament is all about God’s grace and the Old Testament is just God’s wrath *haven’t read it deeply enough*—I used to be one of those people. Today, we’re going to dig for grace in this infamous story of *failure*.
 - Those of you who have spent some time around young kids, you know those cringe-worthy moments when a child first learns to walk or ride their bike. At first, everything is great—and in a split-second, *they hit the pavement*. It’s like, “Wow, look at him go—*OH! Should we go to the ER? Does that need stitches?*”
 - Our son, Edi, was learning to ride his scooter down the hill in our driveway with Emily. He pulled it off repeatedly for his mom and really seemed to have it down! The next day, Emily was telling me all about it and we went outside so he could show me: he confidently stepped on his little blue scooter, cruised down the driveway, we were already cheering, then—*BAM!* He wiped out at the bottom of the hill. Fortunately, no trips to the E.R. or dentist required!
 - You know exactly what those moments feel like, right? It’s similar to watching a bird gracefully soar through the air in your yard and suddenly swerve into your window. *WHAM!*
 - That’s kind of what this story in Exodus feels like for Israel: they’re *just* learning to walk; things are taking off. God has rescued them, guided them through the wilderness, given them a whole new way of life and forged with them this *Covenant*. Everything is in place and they’re ready to run, then—*splat!* They hit the ground *hard*. But this isn’t an accident related to some unintentional clumsiness; it’s a totally intentional dive off a cliff.
 - Right after we hear about Moses getting plans from God to *build* the Tabernacle where God will dwell with them, the scene changes to this horrible moment where the people are *building an idol*. *What gives?!*
 - I don’t know if you’re just hearing this story for the first time, or if you’ve grown up with these Bible stories and it’s really familiar to you. And I don’t know what your initial-reaction is, but I’m guessing your first-impressions of this story might be similar to mine:
 - My two gut-level reactions to this are: First, the Israelites seem really dumb—*after everything God had done, how in the world could they fail so epically?* Second, God seems pretty harsh and judgmental—*like really, you’re ready to wipe everyone out?*
 - But today, as we go deeper into this Old Testament passage, I want to help us see that this isn’t just a story about ancient people and their failures; *it’s a story about us*. And this isn’t primarily a story of judgment; *it’s a story of grace*.
 - In both cases, it helps to put the story in its context to make more sense of what’s going on.

- **Golden Calves**

- So, what’s up with the golden calf? Why in the world did the people want to worship a metallic cow? The ancient practice of idol worship boils down to this:
 - They believed that this image became a tangible representation of a god. The idol gave them direct access and even a sense of *control* over a deity. By performing the right rituals in the right ways, they could influence all the things they worried about most in life: their survival, their fertility, the weather, the harvests. It wasn’t about *relationship*, but *manipulation*. And it wasn’t an image of the real God, it was a god made in their own image.

- Walter Brueggemann says, *“Israel...cannot tolerate the risk of faith...so it incessantly seeks to reduce that risk by domesticating God to a manageable proportion.”* (*The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, © 1994 Abingdon Press)
- Did you catch that? The lure of idolatry is that we cannot tolerate the “risk of faith,” we have this broken impulse to domesticate the infinite God to a manageable proportion—something small enough for us to manipulate for our own purposes.
- Most of us don’t worship golden statues anymore, as far as I know. But we do worship false gods.
 - When we make our politics “bigger than” God, when we make our security bigger than God, when we make our success bigger than God, when we make sexual fulfillment bigger than God, we’re practicing idolatry. When we manipulate our faith in order to serve all these things, we’re practicing idolatry. When we domesticate God to fit our agenda, we’re practicing idolatry.
 - Tim Keller says, *“An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure’...The true god of your heart is what your thoughts effortlessly go to when there is nothing else demanding your attention.”* (*Counterfeit Gods*, © 2011 Penguin)
- What’s crazy is just how quickly the Israelites were willing to turn their backs on what God had explicitly said. I mean, this community had gone through *a ton* in a short period of time:
 - After generations of oppression, they cried out and God sent someone to deliver them. God showed His mighty power against all their oppressors. God split the sea and crushed their enemies. God fed them and led them through the wilderness. God showed up on the mountain in power and glory and awe. God made a sacred covenant with them. God gave them a whole new way of life, elevating them as His special possession, His treasured people, among *all the nations of the world*. God gave them a way to live based on worship and justice. And God made the expectations, rewards, and consequences of this Covenant *crystal clear*.
 - *All that...*and after just 40 days of waiting for Moses to come down off the Mountain, they *completely disregarded it*. It’s an unthinkable level of betrayal and foolishness.
- You might be saying, “How could anyone be that stupid?” But when we go deeper, we begin to discover that this isn’t just Israel’s story: this is our story too. We all do this.
 - We create false gods, we try to diminish and domesticate the real God, and we fall. We see God work in our lives, we experience God’s faithfulness and mercy—and the next day, we forget. We worship God in the morning and curse out the person who cuts us off on the drive home.
 - He parts the Red Sea for us, provides Mana in the desert, gives us a hope and a future—and when we go through a dry spell in our faith, we turn to something else to save us.
 - Would you believe me if I told you, we are just as prone to forget and reach for idols? We are just as prone to break our Covenant with God.
 - That’s why we need to put our faith in one who is truly faithful: that’s why we need Jesus.
- **Amazing Grace**
 - And that brings us back to grace. I said earlier that my other gut-level reaction to this story was that God seems kind of harsh. *“Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.”* Does that challenge or stretch your view of God, just a little bit? It’s like, *God loves me enough to give His very life for me—and He also has the power to destroy me*.
 - Now, there might be different explanations here: perhaps God was testing Moses; after all, God opened the door for Moses to intercede. Regardless, it may be hard to stomach, but *these people had directly seen God move on their behalf. They had made a Covenant commitment with the Eternal Creator that had life and death consequences. And they broke it anyway.*
 - And do you know what? *The same could be said of me.* Standing on my own, I am helpless and without a defense. It doesn’t make me “feel good,” but I can’t deny it. What’s amazing is that this is not how the story ends.

- One commentator says that the tendency for many who are new to the Old Testament is to see the judgement while missing the grace. But, “There is no such thing as mercy unless right is still right and wrong is still wrong,” (Elaine A. “Grace,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, © 2003 IVP). So, where’s the grace here?
- In most other stories, this would be the end. Would you agree? In any other “contract,” this would be a deal breaker. But this is *God’s Story*.
 - In God’s Story, human failure doesn’t have the last word: yes, there is justice, consequence—but there is also *grace*. In spite of Israel’s massive *fall* here, the story of Exodus doesn’t end in destruction. It ends with restoration. If you read to the end, the Covenant is *restored* and God chooses to dwell with these people *anyway*.
 - And *they keep falling*. This is the first of *many* fails. God doesn’t give up on this family.
 - This isn’t just the story of Exodus, this is the story of the whole Bible: people fall, God restores.
 - And this isn’t just the story of the Bible, this is *our story*. We keep falling and God keeps forgiving. God remains committed to our restoration and redemption.
 - *This is why we say that God is good! This is how we know that God is Love!* Not because God always makes us *feel good*, but because in spite of the fact that we fail repeatedly, epically, to our own detriment, God continues to be committed to our highest good and goes to the greatest length to *restore our broken lives*. Even after we spit it His face and nail Him to a cross.
- Friends, *this is the Good News*. It doesn’t start in Matthew, it goes back to Exodus, to Genesis.
 - Just two chapters after this catastrophic betrayal, in Exodus 34, Moses has a conversation with God. He says, “Show me your glory.” And the glory of the Lord passes before Moses and God says, “Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin...” (Ex. 34:6-7). Now, God has revealed His Name to Moses already, but here, in the wake of this awful rebellion, this is the first time in the story that God specifically shares His own character. Moses instantly bows his face to the ground and says, “Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes, then...go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance.” And God says yes.
- God is so ready to enter a relationship with you. It doesn’t matter how deeply you have failed. In fact, God has been working steadily throughout history—throughout your own life—to prepare the way for you to enter this relationship. You can fall again and again, but God’s grace is sufficient to forgive, heal, and restore you. It doesn’t make sense; it doesn’t add up; it’s extravagant: it’s the *grace of God*.
- And now, we have a choice:
 - An idol may give you a false sense of control, but it can never give you *grace*. Will you *recognize* and *reject* your idols, so that you can *receive* the grace of God? *Recognize, reject, receive*. If you do, God will transform your life.
- **Communion**
 - When I first realized this was a Communion Sunday for us, I thought, “Oh, great, I’ve got to connect the story of the Gold Calf...to Communion...?” But once I got into it, I realized this was a pretty good message to lead us into the Lord’s Supper.
 - God knew that we as humans are physical creatures: we need something tangible to understand. The impulse to force God to come near on our own terms led to the sin of idolatry; but God’s plan all along was to come closer than we can imagine: the Son of God came and the Word became flesh, giving His very life for us, to heal the relationship that we had willfully broken. Just as God gave Israel the beauty of the Tabernacle where His presence would abide with them, so He has given us the Sacraments to experience His presence—to touch, and see, and taste *His grace*. We don’t need counterfeit gods anymore; the real God is here with us now.
 - Do remember what Tim Keller said about Idolatry? “*An idol is whatever you look at and say..., ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure...’*” When you look at the love of Jesus Christ, at this Bread and Wine, you can truly say, “My life has meaning, I know I have value, I feel significant, because I have Christ.”