

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't have a clue what has happened to him.”

2 Aaron said to them, “All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” 3 So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4 He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!” 6 They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

7 The Lord spoke to Moses: “Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything! 8 They've already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They've bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” 9 The Lord said to Moses, “I've been watching these people, and I've seen how stubborn they are. 10 Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them. Then I'll make a great nation out of you.”

11 But Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, “Lord, why does your fury burn against your own people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘He had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth’? Calm down your fierce anger. Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people.

13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, whom you yourself promised, ‘I'll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky. And I've promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.’” 14 Then the Lord changed his mind about the terrible things he said he would do to his people. **-Common English Bible**

The people. Your people. People.

I want to pay attention to all the people in our story today— because even though this is a long ago and far away story, even though it involves an act we cannot fathom,

an act so removed from our own time and space— the hearts of the people that produced this act... well, they are recognizable. They don't seem so far and away.

This is the People gloriously and miraculously and safely led out of slavery in Egypt. This is the People provided manna and quail and water in the wilderness. This is the People who witnessed the power of God. These people heard God's voice for themselves when the 10 commandments were first announced in their midst. They promised, not once, not twice, but three times to do all God asked of them. You'd think that this people would have no trouble being faithful.

But Moses, their primary mediator of a relationship with God, goes up on a mountain for a *tete a tete* with God, and when more than a month passes, they give up hope that he's ever coming back. And they willfully break the two commandments on which God places extra weight— You shall have no other gods before me. You are forbidden to make gods of silver and gold. This is header in the 10 commandments and gets repeated multiple times in multiple ways through all the law delivered to Moses. But this is exactly what they are willing to forsake when the discomfort of waiting gets to be too much.

People. How quickly we forget. How readily we do exactly what we ought not to do when left alone too long. Don't we? What precisely do they do? They crowd around their temporary leader Aaron, and ask him to make them gods to lead them. They name Moses as the one who brought them out of Egypt— though, who was it that actually brought them out of Egypt? Wasn't that God? But now that Moses is out of sight, they need something to look at, something to worship...

Aaron, like so many leaders, seems all too willing to satisfy the whims of the crowd. He suggests they give him their earrings. If you flip through the pages of Exodus, all that comes before today's reading, you'll see that the Egyptians thrust gold and jewels upon the Hebrews as they were fleeing Egypt. You'll also see that God had plans for that wealth— that wealth was to be used to build a dwelling in which God could make a home among the Israelites. But, at Aaron's prompting, they fork over all their gold, not for a dwelling for the God who led them out of Egypt, but for a so-called god to take the place of the one, true God. Maybe Aaron thought he was just giving them a way to worship God— especially when he set up the festival— but they

thought he had made them a new god, and the God who was their liberator was pretty explicit about what was not acceptable... and a god of gold was definitely out. And the God sees. And God is sputtering mad.

“Your people”— God says to Moses— “whom YOU brought out of Egypt”— Listen to that! God is ready to disown this people whom he has delivered and for whom she has provided. God is so intensely disappointed in this people— God is so fed up. God’s anger is so intense here it might scare us— Some of you may be saying, “That’s why I prefer the New Testament. Too much wrath in the Old Testament.”

Yet, it seems to me that the wrath we see here is actually a manifestation of love. Doesn’t God sound like the parent who sounds off when a willful teen flouts clear guidance, is disrespectful, wasteful, flagrantly disobedient? Doesn’t one parent often say to the other, “YOUR son, YOUR daughter...” Such words are often the initial reaction to severe offense. But the intensity of this reaction is actually an outgrowth of love. If the parent does not care what the child does, they will not get fired up over anything.

Here’s what I take away from God’s fuming reaction — God cares about people. God loves us so much that our forgetfulness, our unfaithfulness, our wandering... breaks God’s heart.

And here’s the other thing I want you to notice— though most of the people really mess up, including Aaron, Moses’ own brother— one person has the strength to talk God down from this rage. Moses, who has his own issues with this people, nonetheless stands in the gap that has developed between them and their God and negotiates with God. Moses reminds God what God has done for this people already. Moses reminds God of God’s interest in sending a clear message to the Egyptians about the power and possibility of God. Moses reminds God of the promises God has made to this people, through Abraham, and Isaac, and Israel (aka Jacob, Joseph’s father). And God relents; God re-commits to this people in whom God has already invested so much. Moses gets back to Yes with God by reminding God, and himself, who God is.

I heard a marvelous sermon a few years back in which the preacher suggested that what all people need is true humility and true dependence. I’ve told you about this before and offered you the exercise she did with us, but I think it would be good to do

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it again. If you're willing please pull out a piece of paper— your bulletin or any scrap will work— and a writing utensil. Draw a horizontal line on the paper. At one end of the line write “self-rejection” and at the other end of the line write “arrogance.” In the middle write humility— and write down this definition of humility— agreeing with God about who God says I am. Now draw a vertical line to intersect that horizontal line— at the top write “self-sufficiency,” and at the bottom write “co- dependence”— in the middle write dependence— and this definition— agreeing with God about who God says God is.

Moses, in his conversation with God, shows us both—true humility and true dependence— he agrees with God that he, and his fellow Israelites, are heirs of God's promise, beloved children of God-- that is who God says they are; he also agrees with God that God alone is their deliverer, their provider, their savior-- that is who God says God is. Moses is not an equal negotiating partner with God— Moses' arguments are all based on the free gift of grace offered by God. Though there is a genuine connection here, a powerful one, it is not a connection between equals— that is why it is a matter of humility and dependence. The one on whom we depend is far greater than any of us. This is a loving connection between unequal parties.

We are not likely to make a literal idol of gold to worship, but we do make idols. We make gods for ourselves— things of this world in which we put our trust, that lay claim to our hearts and loyalties and our notions of fulfillment and purpose. The spiritual exercises I've been engaging the past several months speak of attachments that limit our interior freedom and ability to wholeheartedly follow Christ's call. These idols or attachments especially accumulate in seasons of high anxiety (it seems like the entire 7 years I've served you has been one long protracted season of anxiety, no?) Our founding theological forefather, John Calvin, suggests that human nature is “a perpetual factory of idols.” When we put ultimate trust in things of this world— even very good things— like our jobs, or our marriages, our retirement accounts, or our houses, or another bottle of chardonnay— we forget that our help comes from God alone and we live, act, and decide as if we do not have the creator, savior, and sustainer of the universe on our side. And do you know how that feels? When we are putting ultimate trust on that which is not ultimately trust worthy— we live with

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greater anxiety— we are restless, anxious, and discontent. But when we put ultimate trust in God, we have the possibility of genuine rest, peace, and contentment.

Want to know an excellent practice for increasing trust in God and God alone? Generosity. Tithing, in particular. Do you want to groan? Go ahead. It's October; you knew it was coming. Consider this an advance message for the upcoming stewardship campaign. But I get the groaning. I know I groan a bit every time my favorite radio shows are interrupted by an appeal for money. I've already pledged! Let me listen to my shows in peace. But when I invite you to tithe I'm not asking you make fair payment for the services you receive from this church— that's what my radio station is asking. When I invite you to tithe, I'm inviting you to make a decision before you earn a single penny in 2025, to dedicate 10% of all the income that comes in to God. You can estimate what that would be and record it on your commitment card for our congregation when you receive that— or split it in half and commit half to the church and the other half to causes that are advancing God's purposes in the world. You can set an intention about what you will give to the special offerings of the year as well. The mechanics are up to you.

But by offering God 10% off the top, before you do anything else with your income, you're placing your trust in God first. You're orienting your heart and your life to honoring your relationship with God. You're living into true humility and true dependence. You are agreeing with God about who God says you are, and agreeing with God about who God says God is. God's got you. Put your trust in that.

Resources in addition to scripture that influenced the writing of this sermon:
The teaching on humility and dependence was delivered in a speech on the story of Gideon in the Book of Judges, delivered by Danielle Strickland at the Global Leadership Summit hosted by Willow Creek in August of 2016. Danielle is an officer in the Salvation Army.
The Rev. Dr. D Jay Koyle, an anglican priest in Ontario and dear friend of mine, helped shape some of the language in the first sentence in the last paragraph on page 4.
Jean Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, I.11.8