

EXODUS 32:15-29

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 2, 2023

Smith

¹⁹ When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

They were a people who had been exposed to the idolatry of the Egyptians for generations. In the early days, Joseph the patriarch had looked after them and cared for them. Then for about two hundred years, it seems that an invader had given trouble to Egypt, at least according to outside sources, and yet the Israelites retained their national identity. When the new Pharaoh rose up in more recent years, the Israelites were persecuted as undesirables, and they were enslaved. They cried out for a deliverer, and God gave them Moses.

Now, just months after leaving Egypt-- a miracle in which not one Israelite was lost despite being pursued by Pharaoh's army, the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, an attack by enemy raiders in the desert, and the long trek south to Sinai. Now Moses was about to come down the mountain to give the people the very first part of the divine law, the Ten Commandments.

The Commandments were carved or inscribed on stone tablets. Moses says that they were written front and back on two pieces of stone. They may have been smaller than the huge slabs we see in artwork. In fact, it's possible that both slabs both contained all Ten Commandments. However they looked, Moses' reaction to what he saw below him affected their appearance ever after.

Moses and Joshua heard a sound. Joshua showed his qualities as a soldier by wondering whether the noise was "the sound of war," but Moses knew that it wasn't. "It is the sound of singing that I hear."

- There below them the people were singing. There's nothing wrong with singing.
- The people were dancing. There's nothing wrong with dancing, per se.
- The people were praying and worship. Are those good things?

Their praying, their worship, their dancing and singing were not about the Lord their God. They were doing these things for the Golden Calf they had built while he was up on the mountain.

Aaron, Moses' brother, was there. Let's remember that Aaron was not yet called to be Israel's first high priest. He was at this moment a faithful Israelite, around 90 years old, trying to hold the nation together without any idea of what to do.

He thought he was keeping the people together by focusing on religion-- any religion-- and if they were asking for gods, he would hold back the rebellion he felt brewing and bubbling over all around him if he just made what they were asking for.

Moses was clear: Aaron had just led them into a different sin. We do not counter sin with different sins. We do not take religion into our own hands. Our worship of God is a response to God's own holy word, it conforms with God's holy will, it centers our attention on God's law and gospel.

In his anger, Moses smashed the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, he burned the calf and melted down the gold it was covered in, and threw all of the ashes and the ruined gold into the river that was there and made the people drink it.

The people were still running wild. Many of them were completely out of control. Their sin was against the First Commandment-- rejecting God, and against the Fourth Commandment-- rejecting Moses their leader. If they were allowed to continue, they might kill or lead away many of those who were not yet running wild. In fact, we know that if this was not put to a stop right away, God would have destroyed them all, putting the entire two million to death. Moses needed an immediate stop to it all. He called out, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me"-- and about 3,000 people died.

Now, today we do not go to war with people who disagree with us about our religion. We do not take up arms, we do not kill or murder in order to make disciples of Christ. But we do not embrace those who reject Christ, either. In fact, our Lord gives us the practice of Church Discipline in Matthew 16 and Matthew 18 and other places to give us the pattern how we show that there is a difference between what we believe and teach and what others believe and teach.

Church discipline shows those who are in error that they have left the path of God's word and God's holy will. Church discipline is also a confession of faith on our part that we believe and teach what God has given to us in his word, and that we will not set it aside even though we are bound to be misunderstood, called names, even threatened and perhaps persecuted because of it. These are crosses we bear out of faith. Surely if Christ could walk the streets of the City of David bearing the cross of our shame, we can carry the little crosses

and burdens of life while he promises to be with us as we do, shoulder to shoulder, step by step, pain endured next to pain.

The golden calf teaches us that except by the grace of God we are just a moment away from idolatry and death.

What sins do we commit that fling us into the immoral celebration with Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai?

- Every time I think that my opinion is more important than the written word of God.
- Every time I feel that my feelings or physical impulses are more important in the moment than God's commands.
- Every time the sinful flesh, or the world, or the devil himself takes control and makes me throw my gold into the pile so that, O, "Out came this calf!"
- And every time I decide for myself that it would be easier to turn a blind eye to false teaching, false doctrine, or a sin than say, "That isn't right."

Of course we will be opposed. Of course we will be called hypocrites. The world thinks that being a Christian means that Christians think they are without sin. This isn't what the Bible says at all. We are at the same time saint and sinner. Being a Christian means being forgiven and wanting to turn from my sin.

God's grace grabs us by the arms and pulls us toward the will of God, leads us on paths of righteousness for his name's sake, and dresses us in the robe of Christ's righteousness, not our own righteousness.

"We are to trust in God alone and turn to him, expecting from him only good things; for it is he who gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all temporal and eternal blessings. It is he who protects us from evil, he who saves and delivers us when any evil befalls.... We must lift up and hold high the First Commandment, not to have any other gods at all, and never joke about it or make light of it. Search and examine your own heart thoroughly, and cling to God alone."¹ Anything else is an idol to be thrown away. Hang onto Christ forever. And know that forever means forever. Amen.

Stewardship Thought (Small Catechism): "You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

¹ Large Catechism I:24,28