

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

September 16, 2007

Text: Exodus 32:7-14; Luke 15:1-10

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"No Golden Calf"

Preparing to write a sermon on this auspicious day on which we rededicate this church around the foundation stone, focusing as we are on this church of bricks and mortar, I searched the Scripture readings assigned for today.

And, would you know it, the first reading is all about God, Moses and the... golden calf. Childhood memories flooded back of Cecile B. DeMille's 10 commandments in which Moses (played by Charlton Heston) hears how God is really upset because the people of Israel have created that golden calf under the dark leadership of Dathan (Edward G. Robinson). God was really angry at all that boogieing going on down in the valley!

Surely this text of the golden calf doesn't apply to our celebration of our church building? Surely not? There has been a piety out in the wider church that would say, "Yes! All buildings are golden calves that distract us from the work of the Gospel."

But, given the wonderful well-kept appearance of the building, I don't think such a narrow piety is here. Indeed, I don't think the opposite is truly here either –that of such affection for this building that we want to exclude people from it. This building is dedicated to Jesus Christ –not Jesus Christ to the building. No golden calf, please.

A well-maintained building is a message to the community at many levels. It shows that the church cares about the community. But it suggests deeply, even subliminally, that God is real –not like Charlton Heston's God, but a God silently there and ever present. If 152 Church St. is standing after the next disaster, people will draw this silent presence from their memories and knock at its door.

Incidentally, there's a lot of very positive buzz in the community right now about St. Francis because we have opened our doors to the monthly meetings of the Neighborhood Emergency Response Team, NERT. This is outreach in the subtle way. So I don't think there is a golden calf in our future. But we might be boogieing when we all celebrate Marty Luther's Birthday on Saturday, October 10th! Mark your calendars!

I think we have a better lead in today's second reading in which Paul says he is an example of God's deep patience, whose overflowing grace was truly changing him from a man of violence to a child of God. Paul wants to tell his story as well as to live it out. We can relate to that. We are not perfect, and that's the point. This same abundant grace from God forgives our failings as it creates new opportunities, new days, and even new lives.

And this leads right into the Gospel reading where our negatives are turned into positives –not as golden calves to be destroyed in fire and brimstone, but as the opportunities for redemption, for being found again, for being welcomed back into the divine community.

The Gospel reading begins with the observation that the Pharisees were grumbling because Jesus was communing with the so-called "sinners". The Pharisees were an impressive movement to bring Judaism back to the ordinary people. Observance of the Torah, surrounded by a huge array of up-to-date regulations, was to bring the people close to God.

But they seem to have lost their way by creating such a system of rules and regulations that the poor, who were most of the population, couldn't even afford one set of pats and pans let alone two to keep kosher. They and the other socially marginalized were the "sinners". By Jesus' time, this way to God seems to have turned into a golden calf. The regulations are worshipped and deep self-righteousness is reigns.

Jesus wants to disarm this religious self-righteousness by showing that God is as close and real as your dad's hand or your mother's breast. For what drives a shepherd to leave the 99 safe sheep and search far and wide for that single one? 99 are righteous, isn't that more than enough? What drives a shepherd to rejoice as she brings the sheep back to the flock? It has nothing to do with doing the right things, or even having the right beliefs, or even righteousness, but everything to do with a passionate love for humankind that seeks out, discovers and restores one lost sheep to the flock, to the whole community.

In this parable Jesus not only shows the new relationship to God that is still breaking into our hardened world, but a very noticeable contrast to the way of the Pharisees. The emphasis is not on rules and regulations, nor on class or education, but on God's compelling spirit in us to seek out sheep who have lost their way. I think it would also be salutary for us to realize that we too are that lost sheep. Otherwise, beware of the golden calf.

In our time, "lostness" covers a broad spectrum. It is not only the gay or lesbian person who was lost from the churches. "Lostness" can also mean the many people who walk past this church because our beliefs mistakenly appear as meaningless or out of date. "Lostness" also includes anyone who is overcome by the angst of death and the struggles of daily life. For life is hard, but then we live.

"Lostness" casts a wide net. But it is powered simply by a deep love, not our own, but as a gift from above. We together, and with others, can cast that net, even when it falls upon ourselves. Because, again, it is not a matter of our right actions or good deeds or social status, but always first the abundantly overflowing grace of God, the source of all creative love. This net draws us together.

For even when we have been lost, lost in despair, discouraged, turning in on ourselves, this little brick building is still standing there, standing there, silently but passionately as a shepherd scanning for the lost sheep, silently but passionately saying, "I am here for you."

This church lived out that moniker in the very first days of its existence when it was commandeered as a medical and feeding station in the aftermath of the great earthquake and fire. "I am here for you." This church lived it again and again as many were baptized, confirmed, married and bid farewell from within its walls. "I am here for you." This church lived it again when Pastors Jim, Michael, Phyllis and Ruth and the whole congregation served from within and beyond its walls in prophetic struggle and service.

This is no golden calf. It is golden love—a golden love for the future as in its silently glorious past. By God's grace, that overflowing abundance of love is the meaning and purpose of this little brick church, of its bricks and mortar—and of the wondrous persons who fill its spaces. That's where the future 100 years abide. I am here for you. Amen

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