

meditative reflections for 15Sept19

“They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them.”

The sad assessment comes from our first reading, which is going to give us the story of the golden calf. It's set at the base of Mount Sinai. God had just done powerful miracles with conviction on behalf of the people, announcing God's people should be free from slavery, and trying to force the government to stop abusing these resident aliens, then finally busting through the armed forces and bursting past impenetrable barriers. God parted the Red Sea. They were free but hungry, so God gave bread from heaven. They were roaming without direction, so God called Moses to give commandments and order.

While Moses is up on the mountain, a mountain shrouded in fire and smoke with thunder rolling and the trumpet blast, right there under that very visible and convincing presence, the people nevertheless grow skeptical. He's gone. So they turn away. Quickly turning aside, they look for something else. They gather their jewelry and have Moses's brother make a cow. In theatrics that would have been as ludicrous then as now, they start genuflecting and prostrating and bowing down to this gilded graven image and saying “O, this shiny little toy we just made saved us from Pharaoh!”

Yup, pretty foolish. Somebody should've elbowed them and said, Uh, the real God is right up there on the mountain, see? Don't you think God might notice and get a little peeved? A little bit of credit for all the hard work seems well-deserved. Or at least wait until God's back is turned before mocking so blatantly.

Again, with melodramatic theatrics in the story, we might tend to shake our heads at the dolts. We at least have the good sense not to go ga-ga over a gold calf. The golden goose that grabs our gander is usually less flamboyant. We'd like to belittle those ancient people for treating something they just created as if it were the thing that had saved them, as if what they manufactured were better than they were, while we throw our

devotions and attentions all sorts of directions and offer ourselves to all manner of silly things.

But I don't want to bother enumerating where our wealth or our praise or inventions or time or interest goes. I just want to highlight that we find ourselves in the same result as the story.

They were at the foot of Mount Sinai, divine pyrotechnics blazing away over their heads, blisters of salvation still on their feet, Passover supper still winding its way through their lower GI tract just as they were winding tracks through the wilderness. But they forgot. They turned away. God seemed absent, and God's goodness seemed distant.

It probably shouldn't have. But it did. So they looked elsewhere. They looked to Moses's brother. They looked to a lump of gold. They looked to a new party. They weren't awful people. They weren't trying to be idolatrous or blasphemous. They weren't wanting to get it wrong. They didn't intend to create a false new god or stray from their religion or forget goodness. They maybe should've known better. But they didn't.

So God responds by sending Moses to preach to them, to call them back, to remind them of the relationship.

We gather here, reminded of the relationship, to have God's goodness preached to us again. Our attentions and devotions have been elsewhere. It isn't our repentant religiosity that restores us. It isn't that we are so contrite, that we pray our way back into grace, that we bow even more heartily to the correct God. Our “Kyrie eleison” is understanding for ourselves that we are quick to turn. And then we sing the glory of God who welcomes us back with joy.

Sinful sheep and repentant coins. Odd characters, these.

If you're like me, a first reaction to these lost parables may be a perturbed disappointment. I guess I place myself with the flock of 99 sheep and wonder why there isn't joy in the presence of the angels of God over me.

Of course that's self-justifying and a presumptuous view of myself. In the end, there really are no 99 sheep. There is only the one sheep, repeated at least 100 instances. We learned that from the gathering at the base of Mount Sinai, turning so quickly astray, following our appetites and our desires and losing track of the God who would seek always to save and bless us.

Though even that is not quite the right picture. That still leaves us to blame, feeling guilty that we couldn't keep focus. Or maybe we get argumentative that the other things weren't just idle distractions but were worth our attention and dedication. We may either be filled with regret, feeling that we've done too much wrong. Or we may resent if we're told to repent.

But that doesn't match these odd characters Jesus sets in front of us. As Emmy Kegler reminds us in her book titled for this passage, the coin didn't do anything wrong to get lost. The sheep is just being a sheep.* If we're identifying with these odd characters, it really isn't about repentance as feeling regret. It's not that we did something bad. About the only detail we have to hold onto is about relationship and about separation. If we can't say it was a particularly sinful coin or especially evil sheep, if we can't say why they got lost, if we can't say whether the shepherd God or the homeowner God should've kept closer track, we don't know. All we know is that she wants them back. She wants the separation to end, to be in relationship with you, to have you near.

This is a God who goes on the hunt for you, sweeping into every dark and dirty corner, a God down on her hands and knees to push aside the dust bunnies and questions of how good a housekeeper she is to begin with, persevering after you, a God even born into this messy world to come find you.

As complex as it is, as easy as it is to find yourself lost over and over again, still our statement of faith will recognize your glimmering feeling that you want to be found.

And though I believe this God is so persistent that she'll find you wherever you are and will not let you remain lost, still I would also say that here in church is maybe the best and easiest place to be found. It's here that you again and again have the promise that God loves you, is looking for you, won't let you remain lost.

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Some grumbling people think that that would shame Jesus, would be an indicator that he's doing something wrong. They were trying to keep pure, to follow not only etiquette but also the way they allegedly could be closer to God. It involved details not only of who but of how, how was the food prepared, in what. It came with lots of risk of contamination and loss of holiness, especially from those who should've been kept out. But here Jesus flagrantly was disregarding the health code and putting himself on the wrong side of his religion.

But Jesus wasn't ashamed. Of course, that's exactly where he wants to be. Some people say that any time you try to draw a line of who is in or to put up a fence, Jesus is going to be on the other side. Jesus exactly wants to welcome and eat with sinners.

This table we're turning to now was originally set by Jesus on the night he was betrayed. It was for his betrayer. It was for the closest friend who would shortly deny three times even knowing him. It's for those who would flee when their faith turned to fear.

This meal he set was recalling the meal on the night before Moses led those people into the wilderness, commemorating God's relationship with a people who wanted not only to be free from slavery but often even from God and each other. Of course Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. That's exactly the kind of God we have.

The best thing you can do, then, as we gather at this table is to find yourself among the sinners. Don't draw the line that would claim you're so

* *One Coin Found*, p2-4

good that you wouldn't have a place at this banquet of sinners, this feast for finding the lost and bringing us back in together, even the grumblers. Jesus wants to eat with you. He's been on the hunt to find you, to bring you back, even over and over, to keep you in God's goodness and eternal embrace.

“When she has found you, she calls friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me.’” That's what's happening here at this table. Our God has found you, welcomes you, and she wants us all to rejoice at this party feast that you've been found again.