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Golden Calf and the Lost Coin
A Sermon about the Bible as the Word of God

Go down, Moses. Your people have acted perversely. Let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.

John Churchill, who used to teach philosophy at Hendrix, liked to say that the only doctrine he'd learned growing up Methodist was that God was nice. Growing up Episcopalian, that's what I heard too.

But here God looks not so nice. We are mid-Exodus. Moses is on the mountain, veiled by cloud, having a long word with God. The children of Israel have lost patience. They feel that their religious and spiritual needs are not being met. They prefer a God whom they can see. So they roll up their sleeves, melt their jewelry, and make one: a golden calf, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

According to scripture, this makes God very, very angry. He is on the verge of doing something terrible. When we hear what God proposes – to "consume" Israel – man, woman and child, it is impossible for us not to think of a twentieth century figure so heinous that I will not say his name. According to scripture, the word for what God intends to do is "evil." You'll find it in the King James translation, which apparently has a stronger stomach than the New RSV.

Thank goodness for Moses' cooler head and quick thinking. He talks God out of it. Lord, think of your reputation. Remember your promise. Stick to your plan. God – Count to ten. Cool Down. "Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people." And, according to the Bible, God stands down. "The Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people."

So it was a near miss: no harm, no foul. Even so, if you are a Dan Brown reader you are probably thinking to yourself that when the Knights Templar got together, this would not have been a text they would have used to lift their devotions towards the sacred feminine.

Were my late, great friend Richard Milwee with us on this side of the veil this morning, I know what he'd be thinking. I've never had a better friend than the Rev. Richard Franklin Milwee. A courageous and fiercely independent thinker, Richard was a liberal in the Deep South, back when being liberal in the Deep South could be dangerous. Then he became politically conservative, while belonging to an Episcopal Church among whose clergy saying "I voted for George Bush" is like saying "I eat dog."

Theologically, though, Richard remained a liberal. When readings like the one from Exodus were assigned for Sunday mornings, Richard would read them to me and repeat his argument that we should stop calling scripture the Word of God. (Jesus yes; Bible no.) Richard and I never agreed about that, and the last time we talked about it he called me superstitious. (From there I think the argument went pretty much straight to “am not, are too, am not, are too.” I was never fast enough to win an argument with Richard Milwee.)

Now fast forward to Luke 15. God – my goodness, how you’ve changed! I love your dress! Why are you on the floor, and what are you doing with that broom?

God, played here by Kathy Bates, is looking for a lost silver dollar underneath the sofa.

Jesus draws this picture of God to explain his own behavior to critics. Why was he seen last night with Bill Maher, Bernie Madhoff, and the cast from Jersey Shore? Has he not read the Bible? Does he not know that God is watching? Why yes, he has and he does – although as a matter of fact, God is not watching, God is searching. Searching for what? For coins – for you and you or maybe better all of us together – a world spinning in space like one big shiny silver dollar -- and God has dropped everything to find it. This God is *nice*. The Methodists were right.

So: between Exodus and Luke, a striking difference, yes? Dangerous holiness on the one side, tender mercy on the other.

If you are the sort of person who could find a juxtaposition of such a sort in any way intriguing, so that you might like to think about it more if you could only find the time, then you may have the makings of a theologian.

So, Mr. or Ms. Budding Theologian, what is your theory about Exodus? Was God just bluffing? Do you think God really has a temper or changes his mind? Thomas Aquinas represents the many very good theologians who have decided that that’s impossible. God doesn’t change. So biblical stories that picture God as changing have to be interpreted as changes in the world in relation to God, not as changes in God *per se*.

So what’s your theory? Be careful, because our beliefs and disbeliefs have consequences. We set our course by what we hold ultimate and true -- for better or worse. Or weren’t you watching television two weeks plus ten years ago this morning?

If I trust God’s holiness while not believing in God’s kindness, then I have my warrant to be a spiritual terrorist. If I think God is just nice, then maybe I’ll be nice too, if it isn’t too much trouble or expensive. (“Hand me that six iron Buddy. I love Sunday mornings – no women and children to slow us down.”) But suppose I think God’s goodness sinks way deeper than “nice.” What if I believe that in God, holiness and compassion are joined: holiness is merciful; compassion is righteous?

That is what we see in Jesus Christ.

What we believe about God gives our lives shape. What we disbelieve is also crucial. One of my better teachers spoke of “faithful disbelief.” “The task of theology. . . is to determine what disbeliefs are enjoined. . . by our faith.”² That is strange to say, but true.

Sooner or later you may become at least a little bit horrified by religion. This happened to Leo Tolstoy who, having seen what was done for religion’s sake, decided at one point to leave the Orthodox Church. But later, he came back. “At one time,” said Tolstoy, “I would have said that all of it was a lie, but now it is impossible to say this. . . I have no doubt that there is truth in the doctrine, but there can be no doubt that it harbors a lie; and I must find the truth and the lie so I can tell them apart.”³

Moses’ ministry had been to separate the truth from a lie: the first and second commandments are commandments of disbelief. Don’t believe in me, says God, as though I were one of your so-called gods. Don’t believe you can see me in your things. I am holy. I am the Lord.

In turn, Jesus’ ministry was to separate truth from lie in Israel’s faith and practice. Throughout the gospels we see him both affirming and contending with his own religion. Yes God is holy, and so must we be holy. But do not believe that in holiness God is not merciful to sinners. If you want a picture of God’s holiness, try a woman on her knees reaching with a long broom underneath the couch.

Christians must read the Bible as whole, and from the center. The center is the mystery of Christ. We read all of scripture in the light of that mystery. In telling of that mystery, the Bible supplies readers with the criterion for its own faithful interpretation.

Gregory of Nyssa was one of the great intellectual and spiritual lights in the early church. His theology gave shape to the Nicene Creed. Like Aquinas, Gregory drew deeply on the scriptures – without them, we would be lost – and like Aquinas, he read them sometimes literally, and sometimes not. He spoke of a “mystical” as well as a “literal” sense of scripture.

For example: did it occur to you to wonder where the Israelites had come by all that gold that went into their golden calf? Were they not poor slaves in Egypt? Why, yes. But, according to scripture, they had “borrowed” the Egyptians’ jewels of gold and silver on their way out of town.⁴ The Bible gives us to understand that God had encouraged this behavior. Gregory considered that, taken literally, this suggestion was unworthy of God. And one of his rules for reading the Bible was that when the literal sense is unworthy of God, we look for meaning at another level.

So Gregory took the plundering of Egypt spiritually, to mean that God wanted Israel to take the true treasure of Egyptian civilization – its learning and culture – into the household of faith. Do you like that? I do. It reminds us that truth and treasure are spread around the world. Wherever the church does find truth, it knows to bring it into the

house for its own reflection and use. A good symbol of that is Charles Darwin's tomb in Westminster Abbey.

So that is one ancient way of reading the Bible through Christ at the center. Gregory did not claim that his was the one true interpretation. Another of his rules was not to reject any interpretation that "leads to virtue."⁵

Now here is the main thing. For Gregory, God doesn't give us scripture to supply us with a literal or true-in-all-its-details description of his action in the past. God gives us scripture to guide us into Christ, and through Christ into the mystery of God's lively presence now.

Gregory calls this learning "to see in darkness." This is what Christian intellectual and spiritual formation is about. It is learning to relate to God without idols. As the Bible shows us, that is very difficult for us to do.

Ours is a difficult religion. We come into the kingdom through *tribulation*. We will never run out of questions.

At the heart of this difficult religion, there lies a wonderful mystery, because through tribulation we come into a *kingdom*. And in all uncertainty, we have complete security -- because the mystery of this kingdom is not only before, above, outside us -- but also behind, below, within us. We are surrounded by it. We cannot hold it, but it holds us, safe as a long lost coin in the grip of a delighted woman's hand.

¹ Exodus 32:1,7-14; Psalm 51:1-11; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10.

² Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1994), 13.

³ Ibid. 12.

⁴ Exodus 12:35-36.

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, in Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, trans., *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, Richard J. Payne, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 8.