

Anything worthy of praise

Exodus 32:1-14

Philippians 4:1-9

A sermon preached by Marci Auld Glass

Southminster Presbyterian Church

October 12, 2008

I don't know what it was like in your household growing up, or what it is like today, but pronouns can be important things. I'm happy to claim my children most of the time, but when they misbehave (which isn't often) or start exhibiting behavior that resembles their father—like when they practice soccer in the house—my pronouns switch. Listen to the difference between “***my*** children raked the yard without even being asked” and “***your*** children drank milk out of the carton.”

Do you hear the difference?

Did you notice it in the texts?

Let's start with Exodus—

The people say to Aaron, “as for this Moses guy, the man who brought us out of Egypt...” They don't call him our buddy, pal, friend, leader—he's just “that guy that brought us out of Egypt”. You'd think Aaron would say, “yeah, I know Moses. Remember, he's my BROTHER?” But he doesn't. This use of pronouns to distance them from Moses is interesting.

And when Aaron fashions the calf out of their earrings, they say, “THESE are your gods, O Israel. This calf is the god who delivered you from slavery.” They are like politicians who seem to believe that just because they say something, it will be true.

But then God and Moses get into the pronoun game too. God sees what the people are doing and says, “Moses, you better get down there. YOUR people, the ones YOU brought out of Egypt, are really making me mad.”

But Moses implored to the Lord, HIS God—no false idols for Moses—and said, “don't be angry with YOUR people—remember the ones YOU brought out of Egypt. They were just like this when you chose them, God, so don't be all surprised by their behavior now!”

Neither God nor Moses wants to claim Israel at this particular moment in history. Or, perhaps in the give and take of the conversation, both partners are calling the other to support the Israelites.

And then Moses, in an argument so well crafted that I wonder if it made God regret God's choice of a leader for the people, Moses brings up the Patriarchs. Remember, he says to God, remember YOUR servants—Abraham, Isaac and Israel—remember how YOU swore to them by YOUR own SELF...

And here's the amazing thing to me. In the midst of this pronoun battle over who has to claim the Israelites, Moses calls on God to change God's own mind.

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And it works. Moses is not afraid to argue with God. Moses is not afraid to remind God of the promises. And God turns back to God's own people.

But I understand why God would want to smite the Israelites right there where they stood with that idol. With that empty piece of Gold. "You want to worship your old earrings!!!" God must have been pulling his proverbial hair out while watching that scene unfold.

Who would build their own gods? That's just crazy. Nobody we know would do that, would they?

I suggest that any time we start giving credit to the wrong thing or the wrong person, we've made an idol. Like the Israelites claiming that the calf had brought them out of Egypt, how many times have we done something similar?

How many times, for example, have we made an idol out of being an American? While I love my country and am thankful to live here, it is to none of my own credit that I am an American. I didn't choose to be born here, and I suspect that is true for most of you too. Yet, we often act as if we are somehow better than the people who had the nerve to be born somewhere else. How often do we hear the phrase 'God bless America' used to imply that God shouldn't be blessing everyone else too?

How many times have we made idols out of ourselves? Acting as if we deserve all of the credit for our own delivery out of slavery. Anytime we deny that we need each other, when we deny that we need help, we're fashioning an idol to our own independence.

Some of you may have heard on the news in the past week that there is a group of pastors who are going to use their pulpits to endorse candidates for political office. They argue that the separation of church and state amounts to censorship and is a violation of their right to Free Speech. While I am willing to share my political convictions, I will not be doing it from the pulpit—and not because of First Amendment issues. To equate the Good News of the Gospel with the political objectives of ANY political party here on earth is to cheapen the gospel. It would be the act of making an idol to my own political leanings and expecting you to hand me your earrings so I can fashion a golden image you can worship. God is not a tool of either the Republican or the Democratic Party and to endorse a candidate for president from this pulpit would be a violation of my call to serve the Living God.

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So, what makes us do it? What makes us build empty meaningless idols?

Perhaps we do it when we feel we're alone. That's what the Israelites were thinking out there in the wilderness. Moses had been up on top of that mountain a long time. Look back through Exodus this week and see how many directions God gives to Moses—it must have taken days. But the people didn't know that was what was going on. Did Moses abandon them? Did he die? Is he ever coming back for them or are they going to spend the rest of their lives sitting by the side of this mountain? And this wilderness, below the mountain is barren. You do feel alone in a landscape that vast.

But as much as they felt alone, they weren't alone. They had each other. And Moses was right where he said he'd be. And God was watching over them. When have you felt alone and built idols to your independence or self-reliance?

Perhaps we build idols when we are afraid. Fear was likely connected to the Israelites concerns about being alone. Perhaps they were also fearing the future. What was life going to look like, following God into the unknown future? Perhaps they were building an idol to their past, an idol to the good ol' days, which, of course, were not all that good. Pharaoh was downright awful, in fact. But he was at least predictable. This God is not predictable.

Perhaps we build idols just to keep busy. Perhaps they thought that the act of melting down their earrings and making something they could focus on, sacrifice to, would keep them busy and distracted. Perhaps we build idols to our industriousness. To our productivity. To our economy.

But perhaps we are sometimes called to wait. Just to sit there in the wilderness on the side of a mountain and wait for God. Sometimes we aren't called upon to solve our own problems. Sometimes, heaven forbid, we aren't supposed to be multitasking. Sometimes we are called to sit and wait.

I think the story of the golden calf is a low point for all of the characters, except maybe Moses. When it was all over, I suspect that the people were ashamed. I suspect that God was likely thankful that Moses had talked him out of the planned destruction. That Aaron wished he had another chance to try again as leader.

I was so comforted this week by our text from Philippians as I sat in my own wilderness and tried my hardest not to make more than my share of idols.

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Where the characters in the Exodus text use pronouns to separate, Paul uses pronouns to bring people together.

Therefore, ***my brothers and sisters***, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved....I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, because they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. ...

Don't you want to sign up for his team? Do you hear how he brings people together? I want to sign up to work with Paul. I'd much rather end up in the book of life than worshipping my old earrings. I wish Aaron had thought to respond to the Israelites as Paul responded to the Philippians.

Rejoice in the LORD always, again I will say, REJOICE. Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

What would it have been like for the Israelites to be reminded: THE LORD IS NEAR. And DO NOT WORRY about ANYTHING but in EVERYTHING by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Maybe the outcome wouldn't have been any different had Paul been addressing them instead of Aaron. Maybe they had made up their minds to create their own God before they even went to speak with Aaron. But I wonder.

If Paul came to me in my wilderness and said, "finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and IF THERE IS ANYTHING WORTHY OF PRAISE, think about these things."—if Paul said that to me when I was anxious, fearful, alone, I just hope that something would click.

Anything. Do I have ***anything*** worthy of praise?

Well, I am still in the wilderness and I'm not sure where Moses is and if he's coming back, but I guess I am not alone. I have my friends and family. And this place does sort of look like a moonscape, but the view is great and I can see for miles. And the stars are so bright in the night sky. And my children came and snuggled with me tonight, even though they think they are too old

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for such things. And I guess that wandering free in the wilderness is better than being Pharaoh's slave. And I have my health.

I guess I have some things in my life that are worthy of praise.

If there is anything worthy of praise, Paul tells us, think about these things.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

So, this week, as we wait in our wildernesses, let us think about those things in our lives worthy of praise. For health or family or warm houses. For the beauty of autumn leaves. For the community of faith that we have here. For Boise State's win over Southern Miss. Whatever it is in your life for which you can turn to God and say "thanks"—think about these things. Amen.

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord's face shine upon you and God be gracious unto you.

May God give you grace to never sell yourself short.

Grace to risk something big for something good.

and Grace to know that the world is too dangerous for anything but truth
and too small for anything but love.

And now may God take your minds and think through them.

May God take your lips and speak through them

And May God take your hearts and set them on fire.