

How Far Would You Go?

Laurie Haas



Exodus 32:1-14

It's interesting how Steve McConnell can preach such a nice sermon about God last week. How God is so loving and kind and has provided blessing upon blessing in Steve's life and in our lives and how we have to pause to ask "Why me?" Why do I get to live and bathe in this love of God?

Steve went away this weekend for a Board Meeting and then to spend some time with his buddies in New Jersey - going to a baseball game or football game or some other highly intellectual activity. And do you know what he left me with? He left me with a God who is so ticked off at the Israelites that God wants to wipe them off the planet. Our Scripture lesson today depicts God as angry, hurt and jealous...someone who not only denies that the Israelites are his, but he calls them names and his wrath is burning so hot that he wants Moses to leave him alone so he can incinerate them! Seriously? What kind of God got dropped into my lap...and where's the Good News in this?

I hope you have been reading along with the Daily Readings for our Narrative Lectionary. They are in our bulletin each week and posted on our Facebook page. They keep us moving as a church family through God's Story. This last week, God guided and protected the Israelites on their flight from Egypt with Pillars of Clouds and Fire, parted the Red Sea as well as providing food and water in the desert.

So Moses is up on the mountain with God for 40 days and nights, when - all of a sudden - down at the base of the mountain, God hears a sound that takes his breath away. But not in a good way, like when Genevieve and Jonathan play a piano duet. No, God

heard music alright, but it was his people...partying. I'm not sure if you've ever come home early from a trip, having left your teenagers at home and as you're walking up to the house you heard your people partying? Well I think that sinking feeling might be somewhat similar. God heard the noise - but God being God - He knew that the Israelites had made an idol and were having the time of their life dancing, celebrating and doing other unmentionable things all under the heading of "worship."

And here we get to meet the God of anger, vengeance, jealousy, judgment and retribution. Thanks Steve.

The Golden Calf is a familiar story, right? And I think it often gets talked about in how we shouldn't have idols. But I think this passage is about something just a bit deeper. I think the Golden Calf story shows us that the most important thing that God desires of us - is a relationship with him. A real, authentic relationship. And here's the thing about a relationship with God, He very often uses other people in our midst to make the introduction or the re-introduction to him. In fact, He even used his only son.

Now you know that many young families do not come to church anymore right? Some of your children or grandchildren may be missing out on the blessing of being a part of a faith family and the relationships here. Imagine the impact you could make on a young family if you decided to spend one hour a week going into our preschool to read some stories. You would have to put on some protective armor, because you know the unfiltered words of a 4 year old can go straight to the heart. They have a way of grabbing you right in the soft place under your arm where your triceps used to be and they will look up to you with big innocent eyes and say, "Wow, you have a lot of nose hair." But they will also grab your heart, with unfiltered joy and sticky hugs. And perhaps they will tell their parents about the church grandma or the church grandpa who reads to them each week and then we've done it. We've planted a seed of God's

love in a family that may be desperate for such a relationship.

Now some people refer to the Golden Calf as the "fall story" for the Israelites. Remember back in Genesis when we read about the fall of Adam and Eve? They eat the fruit from the only forbidden tree in the whole garden. Their disobedience to God certainly had some consequences, like now they have to find a new place to live, they are going to have to work for their food and childbirth is going to hurt more than anything. But God didn't contemplate annihilating them!

So what was it that the Israelites did that caused such an intense reaction from God? Well they broke

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the first two commandments and it seems like these get to the heart of the matter: God's deep desire to have a relationship with us. Commandment Number one: We have one and only one God and we shall have no other god before us. Number two: We shall not make an idol of any kind to worship, because God admits that he is a jealous God. This isn't a matter of disobedience to a law code; it's a matter of unfaithfulness to the God who had bound himself to a people. Israel has violated the established relationship.

When the Israelites made an idol to worship and gave that lifeless piece of metal their praise and worship. It must have broken God's heart. You know, when one

has a broken heart, the first emotion expressed is often anger. I have a friend whose wife was unfaithful to him. When he discovered the infidelity, he felt like their relationship was broken and so was his heart. And let me tell you, anger was a quickly expressed emotion. He felt as though he wanted to obliterate a couple of people at that time - if you know what I mean. And he said those words to his best friend (and to his counselor), where he felt safe to voice his raw emotions. The narrator of Exodus has given God very real human emotions to which we can all relate. God expressed them to Moses, his best human friend. You do that in a deep, trusting relationship.

Every modern day reader can also relate to the irony

of God's words when he tells Moses to go down at once to take care of "your" people whom "you" brought up out of the land of Egypt. It's like when our Husky, Malachi who couldn't be more loved by my husband and me gets into the trash. I will call my husband and say, "your" dog got into the trash! The play on words does not remove my love of our dog, anymore than God's words remove God's love for his people.

And that love is exactly what God promises to us in the covenant with him. Right at the end of the 2nd commandment in Exodus 20, verse 6, we read, "but I the Lord your God, showing steadfast love to the

thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

Here’s where we learn how far someone will go to help restore relationships with one another and with God. The God of the universe has told Moses that his wrath is burning against these ungrateful, calf-making fools and he plans to destroy them. Moses has lost his stutter and has become quite the spokesperson when he convinces God to change his mind. In relationship with Moses - a relationship that God values, God is safe to express his feelings and God is open to what Moses has to say. And after blowing off a little steam, God actually “changes his mind.”

Now that takes some kind of courage. Moses knows the kind of power that God has; he’s had a front row seat to many magnificent displays of unbelievable power. Make no mistake...the same God who spoke the world into existence could speak Moses out of existence. Yet Moses trusts the God with whom he has a deep relationship.

What about you? Do you trust God enough to bring him your best argument for a wayward child, or your deepest sorrow, or your most shameful deed, or your most rotten thoughts or your angriest feelings? You see, if we come to God with all of who we are, we stay in relationship with him. And it’s real and authentic. By listening to Moses, God has shown that God treats his relationships with an integrity that is responsive to what they do and say. And God promises that in relationship with him, we will receive steadfast love that comes in the form of healing and acceptance.

But we can’t be afraid; we have to have faith that God keeps God’s promises. And if you believe that, really believed that...how far would you go to build a relationship for God?

Dr. Kara Powell is a researcher and professor at Fuller Seminary. She just finished a book called *Growing Young*. While they were conducting their research on churches that “get it right” with attracting and

keeping younger people engaged in church, they came across a story about a guy in Pennsylvania named Bill.

The teenagers loved this guy. Bill is this amazing adult who really invests in them, who loves them and shows up at their games, their plays and their recitals. When Dr. Powell’s team went to the Pennsylvania church for a site visit, they discovered that Bill was not a cool, hip young adult. Bill was in his 70s. It turns out that Bill had a really tough adolescence; he remembers participating in major events and there just weren’t any adults in his life cheering him on from the stands.

And so Bill has made it his mission that no kid from his church is going to have a game or a concert or a graduation without an adult cheering them on from the stands. So a lot of time it is Bill, but Bill has wisely recruited other adults to get to know those students and to go to their events so they always have someone to cheer them on.

You see, Bill trusts his relationship with God and he was willing to risk putting his fuddy-duddy self into relationship with a bunch of teenagers. Trust me, those teenagers are being brought into a relationship with a living God through a 70 year old man and his senior recruits.

From our relationship to God, we can pull from our brokenness like Bill, or we can pull from our God given gifts in an effort to build relationships with others. You see, it is through our authentic relationships, where we catch a glimpse of God’s steadfast love and amazing grace.

I began my wondering of this Scripture passage with the question: “What kind of God is this?” Well, I discovered a God who is real and a God who understands my feelings. I learned how much our God values relationships and even though we will never be able to fully understand God’s ways with our comparatively pea-sized brains, we do know that God wants to be in full relationship with us. Barbara Brown Taylor gives us a reminder of who God is. “God is

greater than my imagination, wiser than my wisdom, more dazzling than the universe, as present as the air I breathe and utterly beyond my control.”

And the Good News? Well this God who keeps his promises, loves us so much and so wants to be in relationship with us that He sent his only son to earth to walk and live among us. And his sacrificial love on the cross compels us to do crazy things like tutoring one-on-one with a kid, like showing up at a basketball game of a teenager, like telling our next door neighbors that we are collecting supplies for our neighbors in Haiti...all in the hope that they will be introduced to God and maybe even catch a glimpse of Christ in us.



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3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323