

Exodus 32: 1-6
Luke 18: 18-27
October 26, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Last week I raised the question about why we come to worship on Sunday mornings and participate in an institution which seems so ill adapted to the real world of our day. It is easy to believe that the church is an outmoded organization with an outmoded message made up of people who are living in an illusion. In addition the church is perceived by many people as not only irrelevant but actually part of the problem. We are seen by many as more concerned about moral purity than the grace which receives all people and beckons us to a deeper and transforming life in God. We are perceived as political activists for our particular perspectives. We don't talk to each other as sisters and brothers of one faith but as adversaries each believing we hold the truth. We debate with car bumper stickers and contribute to an atmosphere of hostility and distrust. And of course, the church is known a group that is always asking for money.

And so we are! It is Stewardship time and we are soliciting pledges for the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ for 2015. So far we have received pledges which cover 25% of the proposed budget. We can now pay Cheryl our secretary and Charlotte our Organist and Choir Director, heat the building and pay most of the insurance.

But the big question is, "Why?" Why give so much money to such flawed and perhaps irrelevant organization? Why pay staff and maintain a building? More to the point, why take money which supports our financial security for our families and retirement and give it to an

organization such as this? Why put our personal lives at risk when the world is already such an uncertain place?

And yet, even as I say these things something in me rebels—and I hope something rebels in you. Each one of us is here because in one way or another we know that the *real* truth is that there is a God, a source of life which created the universe and created each of us. We know that there is a power greater than ourselves. When we trust in that power with our whole hearts, minds and strength we experience a sense that we have a place in this big universe. This power is not impersonal but intensely *personal*. It is love which believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. Unlike the love of the world which comes and goes, *this* love never ends. It can be relied upon. And the more we rely on this love we actually experience it more and more. It becomes the operating principal of our lives as individuals and our life together. We become vessels of love and hope for the community and world around us.

The story of the Exodus teaches this lesson in positive and negative ways. When the Israelites trust in the power that delivered them from slavery and which feeds them day by day; and when they trust in the promise that God will lead them to a land of promise, they are a people of God. They move forward. They witness to the reliability of God. But when they become more impressed with the dangers of traveling in wilderness than the reliability of God—they fight amongst themselves demand immediate responses from God and even want to return to slavery.

This morning's reading illustrates a terrible moment when the Israelites did just that. Moses has been on Mt. Sinai for forty days. The people become restless and fearful. So they go to Moses' brother Aaron to make a golden calf. They believe that an idol made of gold will give

them the sense of security that they lack in the moment. Aaron agrees to this and orders the people to give their gold to make this idol. When it is completed the people cry, “Here are your gods O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

Let’s pause a moment and reflect on the magnitude of the spiritual tragedy this represents! Think about what it means to trust in the invisible presence of God and throw it all away to find refuge in a statue of gold. Think about the life that God breathed into the clay which became Adam. Switch back to this lifeless shiny figure of an animal. My stomach literally becomes nauseous when I picture these people celebrating around this golden idol and crying out, “Here are your gods, O Israel who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

Friends, to me this is not about how much wealth we have or do not have. It is about where we put our trust. Do we have wealth or does wealth have us? Do we trust the invisible presence of a loving God to provide for us or do we live lives worrying about what will happen if we lose what we have? Jesus said literally nothing about the moral issues which are tearing churches and denominations apart. He spoke a great deal about the spiritual danger of money. I wonder how he would feel about the phrase, “In God we trust” on a dollar bill?

For Jesus the great danger of money is about whether we are spiritually free or spiritually in chains. It is why he praised the widow who gave her last coin. It is why he was sad when the rich young ruler could not part with his wealth and so enter the joy of God’s kingdom. It is why he said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus does not say it is impossible—just difficult and highly unlikely. But then an interesting thing happens: The disciples cry out, “If this is so, Lord, who can be saved?” What a

great question! Even these disciples have day jobs. They have families to support. It is fine for them to go tramping around the country with this itinerant preacher, but their wives and children need a roof over their heads and food to eat and clothes to wear. Like everyone else they have to pay taxes and make repairs on their homes. Even then medicine was not free and there was no health insurance. Some days the fishermen came home with plenty of fish and sometimes with nothing to sell. Should they have no savings for those lean days? Should they have no way to support themselves when they were too old for work? If it is wrong for a Christian to have a bank account then who has a chance to be saved?

Thank goodness those disciples asked that question! It certainly is my question and I suspect it is yours as well. The good news lies in Jesus' answer. "With people it is impossible; but not with God. With God all things are possible.

I began the sermon with the observation that to the worldly so-called "real world" the church is an anachronism, an old institution ill adapted to the modern world. And so it is! And I say, "Thank God!" The truth is that that Jesus had no intention of fitting in, adapting or making peace with the worldly world. He came to make the love and grace of God visible in human experience. He preached the kingdom *of God*, a realm where all creation finds its proper relationship to God and to each other. A realm where finally the break that occurred in the Garden of Eden is forever healed.

The church stands as the one community that, without apology claims to be on a journey to this promised "land". It is God's purpose to bring this about and with God all things are possible. The only question that remains is this: Who or what will we trust on this journey? Amen.

