

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
October 9, 2005

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
World Communion Sunday

Exodus: 32: 1-14  
Matthew: 22: 1-14

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The Invitation  
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In the opening canto of Dante's *Inferno*, Dante finds himself blocked on his path down a mountain by a voracious she wolf, whose "voracity for feeding makes her hungrier." Out of the shadows appears Virgil, who once identified as the poet is beseeched by Dante to help him. Virgil invites Dante to follow him:

Therefore I judge it best that you should choose  
To follow me, and I will be your guide  
Away from here and through an eternal place:

A little further on Dante replies....

Help me escape this evil that I face,  
And worse. Lead me to witness what you have said,  
Saint Peter's gate, and the multitude of woes –“

Allor si mosse, e io li tenni dietro.  
Then he set out and I followed where he led.

In *The Inferno* there is no sign of Christian forgiveness, even though Dante is thought of as one of the Middle Ages' greatest of Christian poets. The dominant theme is not mercy, but justice, according to translator Robert Pinsky. It is a justice dispersed with the severity of the ancient law of retribution. Those who spurned the forced or unwritten invitation of the political rulers and system of Dante's Italy, were subject to the same fate as those in the hell he was soon to visit. Seeking justice in those days was a dangerous task, especially if you were among the oppressed. And yet, it is just that road –a road of justice coupled with mercy – that I believe we, as Christians, have been called to follow.

From the earliest of times in the recorded history of the First , that is the Old Testament --comes the premiere of Divine invitations – the invitation to form a covenant between God and God's human creation. Our Exodus reading this morning and what follows is clear in the telling of what happens when such a promise is broken, when an invitation is spurned, when fear supplants faith and

patience - with the immediate need to try and control our own environment and destinies by replicating God into a design of our own making.

It may be that the basic question of this morning's reading in Exodus is whether or not God will in fact lead a people who have now rejected God's leadership? If it were not for Moses' intervention with God, the punishment would have been swift and retribution formidable toward a stiff-necked people, according to the Scriptures. Even so, we're not quite sure what happened. This vengeful, mind-changing, uncertain God makes me wonder – maybe you, too – if something wasn't lost in the telling or the translation.

It was, after all, a time for which there are no primary documents, so to speak. Even the golden calf story causes some questions for the reader, since the prohibition against idols did not actually emerge until the 8th and 7th Centuries BCE, starting around Josiah's reform. The Northern Kingdom of the times had the twin-headed calves as a symbol of worship – with no apparent problems or prohibitions.

What we do know about this period is that the tribes of Israel were influenced by many groups, among them the Canaanites, and along with them some of their worship practices. It was a period of syncretism - that is a fusion of differing systems of belief that didn't quite work all that well together. Probably the main challenge of Moses' call was to find a way to build an identity and worship system for the tribe of Israel that lived up to the covenants that had been established to differentiate them as God's chosen people. Besides, the Promised Land to which they were being led was Canaan – and they were not being led there to live as the Canaanites did. Sooner than later the break had to come – and it seems to have its climax somewhere around this incident at Mount Horeb.

Whether or not the calf was actually constructed or the events unfolded exactly as one or the other differing versions suggest, the problem was not the idol or representation, itself, but the act of turning away from God and Moses. The problem was the attempt of the people to design a God that could be managed in place of the charismatic Moses who seemed to have disappeared. As with the basis of all sin, this sin was one of cascading forgetfulness; forgetfulness of whom they were and through what God had led them. Maybe they were just longing for an easier more comfortable way after all they had been through. There is nothing wrong with that in itself, but when that desire includes breaking the promise – the covenant with God – well, in the ancient writings -- something of “biblical proportions” – more often than not with a fair share of violence – is about to follow!

Still, it seems hard to believe that those who had been brought out of the slavery of Egypt could ever forget Moses' amazing interaction with the Pharaoh, the plagues sent by God, the parting of the Reed Sea, the manna in the dessert, and more. The way I see it is that if I had been one of those in the tribe and had seen

that many amazing examples of God's power and miracles in our world through this commissioned leader of Moses – I'd be right there with him. From this lens, thirty-three or thirty-four centuries later, I almost feel like saying, "What more did you need, folks?"

Yet it was a time seeped in the magical and mystical elements of religious and cultic practices that abounded. Some even suggest that such signs and magical elements were evident in the times – that is real. We just don't see them today because they have -- for some reason -- long passed from our consciousness and the abilities of most of us to know such things. I wonder, though, if those times were so different from these times of ours in that the signs of God – the invitations of God – are still obvious – it's just that we can have a hard time discerning them because of all the "static." Another reason why the community of the Hebrews, their tribes – were certainly as important as the communities in which we share today – because only together we can filter out that ubiquitous noise.

The trouble for any of us begins when the communities themselves or their laws become idols in attempts to better understand, define, and manage God. For me that is different from trying to "know" God. One way I think that happens is by recognizing that God continues to speak to us today – and that we need to listen today just as much as we need to study Scriptures in figuring out – discerning - how our community will respond in this broken world as followers of Jesus and the One who sent him.

And now to Matthew and the year – thereabouts – of 70 CE and this morning's reading entitled The Parable of the Rejected invitation.

Originally, it is believed that this parable originated in Q, the documents thought to be the source for the evangelists in writing their gospels. Both Matthew and Luke used Q as the basis for their writing, although each used it in their own way, with Matthew, in particular, adding the wedding scene and the second invitation and warning in vs. 11 – 14:

"But when the ruler came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the ruler said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him in the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

Luke's version, on the other hand, (Luke 14:16-24) has Jesus telling the story as "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many." The ending line of Luke's telling, vs. 24, is "For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner."

Quite a difference.

Now, whether it is Matthew, once more using an allegory to address the troubles in Rome and the Jewish Wars – or perhaps a less politically oriented telling in Luke’s gospel – the point is clear in both: Jesus used the parable to explain why he went to the sinners and the non-religious with his Good News – because those to whom he went first, the righteous – were too busy with their lives to pay attention.

Maybe the greatest disappointment for Jesus in his Good News and gospel – maybe the same disappointment of Moses – was that the righteous and those who had first-hand known the power of God – were just too busy, now that their lives had become active, full, distracted. The greatest disappointment, maybe, was that these were the people that God and Moses; Jesus and his disciples had hoped would embrace God and the Good News; the Promise and the Invitation with such fervor that they would carry it to others, slowly – or maybe not so slowly – touching all of humanity.

In Moses’ time, as in Dante’s, those who rejected the invitations were dealt with harshly; but in the new paradigm of Jesus, our Christian faith teaches us to move from retribution to service, seeking to serve the least among us with and welcoming them into our midst – hoping that by our work and example – even those most inclined to despise us might find themselves moved. It is work that has its rewards deeply inside and beyond who we are. It is, in many ways, a different dimension from the busy, forgetful pace of our times and that of Moses.

Clearly, there is a call to justice and mercy in our work, without and benefit in revenge or retribution – so we are taught by Jesus. It seems that resolving problems with such approaches only produces more problems, including wars, malaise, despair, and more of what we first started out to resolve.

If anything has changed from the time of Moses to now, it is the change brought about by the life of Jesus and his teachings.

Jesus delivers the “new” reality of our mission: – to make sure all are invited into our community with open and welcoming hearts; that we always recognize one another as guests invited to the same great banquet of love and grace that we share, even – or maybe especially -- in our most difficult of times. There is no cure or solace; celebration or joy for Christians that can be forgetful of whom and where we are and what our mission calls us to be. As we strive to remember that amidst the forgetting – the Holy Spirit always makes up the difference and wonders of all kinds occur in our lives and the lives of those around us.

This morning we witness evidence of our mission and our commitment to these teachings in the invitations we bring to Ann, Jack, and Cathy to serve this congregation in ways that help us to remember our mission to follow the teachings and heart of the first-century radical called Jesus. In so doing, we

remember the invitation we all share as a community to support our leaders and one another. It is in this truth of community and practice of our faith that we find the light that shines so brightly in this congregation. In all of the Scripture, light always follows darkness. Always. Whatever the struggle or has gone before there is always hope and healing and energy for the work the light calls us into – it comes with every invitation.

After his journey into the deepest of darkness and despair, even Dante emerges into the light in the 34th and final canto of his journey:

And possibly,  
What now appears on this side fled its berth

And rushing upward left a cavity:  
This hollow where we stand.” There is below,  
As far from Beelzebub as one can be

Within his tomb, a place one cannot know  
By sight, but by the sound a little runnel  
Makes as it wends the hollow rock its flow

Has worn, descending through its winding channel;  
To get back up to the shining world from there  
My guide and I went into that hidden tunnel;

And following its path, we took no care  
To rest, but climbed: first he then I – so far,  
Through a round aperture I saw appear

Some of the beautiful things that Heaven bears,  
Where we came forth, and once more saw the stars

E quindi uscimmo ...

So, too, have we come forth and walk in the light!

Amen

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Benediction:

An important part of the Yom Kippur service is the "Vidui" (Viduy) or confession. The confessions serve to help reflect on ones misdeeds and to confess them verbally is part of the formal repentance in asking G-d's forgiveness. Because community and unity are an important part of Jewish Life, the confessions are said in the plural (We are guilty).

As Yom Kippur ends, at the last hour a service called "Ne'ila" (Neilah) offers a final opportunity for repentance. It is the only service of the year during which the doors to the Ark (where the Torah scrolls are stored) remain open from the beginning to end of the service, signifying that the gates of Heaven are open at this time.