

October 16, 2011

“Have You Seen a Golden Calf?”

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Have You Seen a Golden Calf?

Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22
Pent 18A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett
October 16, 2011, Claremont UMC

Have you seen a golden calf? It's not the kind of thing you see just ambling down Foothill Blvd. very often.

I can remember a TV commercial some years ago that showed a giant golden bull. Seems like it was an ad for some kind of investment firm.

You know I just recently saw a picture of a golden calf, or maybe it was a golden bull... I actually couldn't tell the difference. Protesters ushered a Golden Calf, or bull, into Zuccotti Park in New York last Sunday. Did you see that picture?

The bull, or calf, was mounted on a wooden platform and about six people were carrying it on their shoulders. The title at the base of the statue said "Greed." The way they were carrying the golden icon could be interpreted in two ways:

- it could have been a veneration of the golden idol, hence lifted high up in procession.
- Or it could have been a funeral procession with the casket lifted high up. I couldn't tell the difference.

Of course I am describing a scene from the "Occupy Wall Street" event in New York, which are also happening all over the country and the world.

I'm struck with the timing and similarities between the story in Exodus that we have been following the last few months and the "Occupy Wall Street" movement.

Moses went up the mountain and the folks down at the bottom started getting restless and nervous without a leader they could see and hear. So they formed a Golden Calf that they could worship. When Moses came down the mountain he was very unhappy about the veneration of the Golden Calf.

The Golden calf, or bull, that was paraded in New York was not for the people to worship, but rather to expose how we in the U.S. worship money, or the stock market, or our portfolios, or whatever...

Jesus was in a similar situation as described in Matthew's gospel. The Pharisees sent their disciples to Jesus. First they buttered him all up telling him how fantastic he was, and how sincere he was... blah, blah, blah. Then they asked their trick question: "Tell us then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Jesus saw through their phoniness and called them on it.

New Testament scholar Eugene Boring gives us some helpful background: "The tax issue was not general and abstract, but referred to a particular tax, the 'census,' the Roman head-tax instituted in 6 CE, when Judea became a Roman province. This census triggered the nationalism that finally became the Zealot movement, which fomented the disastrous war of 66-70. Matthew looks back on this whole movement and its tragic consequences, but knows it was a divisive issue earlier and still engenders deep feelings in his day.

"The tax could be paid only in Roman coin, most of which contained an image and inscriptions considered blasphemous by many Jews: 'Tiberius Caesar, august son the divine Augustus, high priest.'

"Thus they are asking a trick question, calculated either to alienate the nationalists (if Jesus said yes) or to make him subject to arrest by the Romans (if Jesus said NO to paying the tax)." ⁱ

Christians today have similar challenges.

There are some who say that the meaning of Matthew's story is to say that everything belongs to God. They would say it doesn't matter whose image is on the money, finally everything is from God.

Our contemporary notions of stewardship would concur with this idea. Finally everything is of God. Whatever we have, whoever we are is from God. It's a good theological concept.

But Jesus was no ascetic. By his life and teaching he assumes that we live in the world. We cannot really separate ourselves from the culture in which we live. We are human and we are shaped by our culture. That is truly the gift of Jesus' incarnation: how do we live God's love and justice in this world?

Rick Marshall, a commentator for Center for Process Studies writes, "In the Exodus text, we are taken way beyond the issue of living in the empire to the issue of whom to trust to provide a future and well-being and peace. Do we trust our own constructed mechanism (Golden Calf) of producing well-being? Or do we trust our future to God? The empire makes all kinds of promises to us, asking us to trust it. We are enticed by it, wooed, lured, lied to, scammed, entangled beyond our ability to evaluate life in the empire clearly." ⁱⁱ

We may grumble about paying taxes and at the same time enjoy benefits such as parks, roads, lighting, etc. So we have to lift our heads up, and as best we can, live in our culture and at the same time step back and ponder and evaluate our culture. Are we caring for the well-being and peace of people now and in the future?

There are some who would frame such a question in YES or NO terms. Jesus demonstrated that's it is much more complex than a YES or NO response. When he asked the religious authorities to produce coins, he was quietly revealing how they are already complicit in the very question they were putting to him. They were likely embarrassed by the very act of producing the coin.

Jesus didn't judge them for having the coin, but rather exposes the complexity of the question.

I caught a short program on Public Broadcasting the other night called "Need to Know," a program I had not seen before.

It was about the "Occupy Wall Street" protests and went on to draw comparisons between them and the "Tea Party" protests. Well, I thought, that sounded interesting so they had me. The similarities were made that both movements are based on the perception that the elites have all the power. There is a sense of gloom, discontent, and anger that believes there are forces at work that don't have our best interests at heart, which are beyond our reach.

Where they depart from one another is in the analysis and action. The Tea Party says it is big government that is hurting the middle class. The Occupy Wall Street says it is our Big Banks and Stock Market that hurts the middle class.

Now I recognize this is over simplified and there are more issues at stake than this, but you all have some notion about worship not going much past an hour or so; not to mention the limitations of my feeble understanding.

But this does serve as a contemporary illustration of the kind of question the Pharisees were putting to Jesus. To the Tea Party person Jesus might ask for an accounting of the benefits of government... show me the coin... your taxes.

To the Occupy Wall Streeter Jesus might ask for a copy of the most recent portfolio of one's investments.

Ah, we've been exposed... no matter which movement we might feel more empathy for... Jesus calls us to transcend our positions enough to see how we benefit... and to see who does not benefit... and further - to see who is hurt.

I know you are all waiting with baited breath to hear what the answer is... and I'll take my cue from Jesus and ask, what serves the common good for humanity and creation?

It's complex. Moses and God were wrangling and tangling up there on the mountain. According to the Exodus story God was ready to smite all those golden calf worshippers down there, but Moses calmed God down and they lived. Of course this was all Moses' point of view and he was the only one to tell about it... so who knows what was going on up there!

The Exodus and Matthew texts both ask us today, "To whom or what do you trust... or value... or give your ultimate allegiance? On who or what do you rely?"

We can compare and contrast systems of government, but finally that is all they are. They are only means for people to live together and care for the common good.

We do not worship democracy.

We do not worship government.

We do not worship Wall Street, banks, or derive our ultimate meaning in life from the morning report.

Let me also add we do not worship church!

If we do, the only outcome is gloom, discontent and anger. We will always be disappointed.

Social commentator Fran Lebowitz made some pithy comments about our current social milieu and how I wish we had a screen that would come down right now because I could never capture her delivery.

She makes the point that society no longer distinguishes between public and private. She cites health care as an example. She said Personal health is for the individual to decide. She expressed displeasure with Mayor Bloomberg for meddling with people's salt intake!

What is public health is widely available flu vaccines and insuring a secure water supply

She went on to say that Democracy isn't natural. We have to be taught what it means. Democracy requires things from people! Then she squinted into the camera and said, "Citizens, we used to be called citizens instead of consumers! Nothing is required of consumers except to consume! Citizens have many responsibilities... you have much to do! It's your job! Get up and do your job!"ⁱⁱⁱ

Now that has been an insidious slow turn of identity...from citizen to consumer! I believe she is right! When I was a child all pillows in everyone's houses had these big white tags on them saying, "Warning, this tag is to be removed by the consumer only." All our pillows still had the tags because we didn't know what a consumer was!! We thought we'd get into trouble if we took off the tag! The pillow police would come and arrest us!!

We are citizens and we have responsibilities and much to do. It's our job.

Jesus talked about the kingdom of God because that's the kind of government they lived with back then. They were in Kingdoms with Lords overseeing them.

Jesus used concrete examples from the people's daily life to draw parallels to God; so rather than *this* kingdom, *God's* kingdom (or as we might say today: God's reign... or God's future) will be different. In either case what is required is active citizenship to help usher in that which serves the common good for humanity and creation.

We are not consumers of God's creation,

we are not consumers of God's grace,

we are not consumers of faith,

we are not consumers of wealth.

We are active agents whom God needs to usher in a far richer perspective, where we check our golden calves, or bulls, and look larger and bigger in our world.

God needs us to make a difference... because we are grateful recipients of God's creation...of God's grace...of faith...and a wealth of love.

We have responsibilities and we need to get up and get to work!

ⁱ Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VIII, p. 420

ⁱⁱ Processandfaith.org

ⁱⁱⁱ PBS.org