

A Living Relationship

[Exodus 32:1-14](#)

[Psalms 106:1-6, 19-23](#)

[Philippians 4:1-9](#)

[Matthew 22:1-14](#)

When you say you have faith, what do you mean by that?

For me, faith has always been about relationship. I talk about engaging with God, interacting with God, and I realize that language doesn't land the same way for everyone. For many people, faith means religious practice: showing up on Sundays, saying the words, believing the right things. Both can be sincere. But this morning's texts describe something else. They show us what it looks like to enter a relationship with God that is alive, that develops over time, and that is far more complicated than simply following along with the liturgy.

Let's begin on the mountain. Moses has been up there for forty days. Twelve chapters of instruction have poured out of God: (not just Ten Commandments, but) how to worship, how to treat the vulnerable, how to build a community. Then God hands him two tablets written by God's own finger. It isn't a rulebook dropped from the sky, it's God teaching Moses how God wants to live with these people, what that relationship can look like.

At the bottom of the mountain, the people are afraid. When God first spoke to them directly, they were so frightened that they begged Moses to go between them and God. So Moses went up on their behalf, and then he didn't come back. For over a month, they had no God and no Moses to tell them what to do.

So they make a calf. We overlook this when we read the story, but they don't ask for a different God. Aaron announces a festival to the LORD. These people want to worship the God who rescued them. They just want God to be tangible. So they build something from what they know, from the gods they saw in Egypt, from their own imagination. A calf is something you can get your hands around. It doesn't leave you alone staring up at a

mountain. It stays where you put it. It never surprises you, and it never asks anything of you.

That is what an idol is: not an evil statue, but a fixed representation of God that we can hold and manage. And before any of us gets too comfortable sitting here thousands of years beyond the times of golden idols, notice how many forms idols can take. For some of us it's stained glass and liturgy. For others it's the Bible itself, gripped so tightly it can't speak back. For others it's a God customized to our own preferences, who never disagrees with us, assumes we are the ones in the right, never asking us to change. That's the same calf with better marketing. Think of a photograph of someone you love. It is precious, but you cannot argue with a photograph. It never changes its mind or tells you what you didn't want to hear. A relationship does ALL of that.

Which brings us to the astonishing part of the story. Watching this, God says to Moses, "Let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them." Notice the language. "Your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt," God says. Your people. God hands them off like a hot potato. And Moses hands them right back: "Why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt?"

Then Moses does something remarkable. He reminds God of God's own priorities: your reputation among the nations, your promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Moses has spent forty days learning what God actually wants, which is to live among these people and bless the world through them, and now he stands up to God on behalf of God's own purposes. **That is prayer.** Not asking God to bless our plans, but naming God's will back to God on behalf of others. The ancient rabbis noticed that "let me alone" is a strange thing to say to someone you want gone, and they heard it as God leaving a door open.

And the LORD changed his mind. I know the theologians among us want to talk about divine immutability, unchangeableness, and we can, later. But Scripture describes a God

who is MOVED by US. Relationship, in God's own telling, is an ongoing conversation, sometimes even an argument. The psalmist remembers it this way: Moses "stood in the breach." A breach is a gap in the wall, the place where the city is most vulnerable. Moses stood there for people who had just done something indefensible.

Now hold that next to Jesus' parable. A king throws a wedding banquet for his son, and the invited guests refuse to come, so the king opens the doors to everyone, "both good and bad." Everyone willing comes inside. They are literally at the party, and the king offers the best of everything to anyone who will take part.

Then the king walks the room and finds one guest who is eating the food but not celebrating. He isn't wearing wedding clothes. He stands there, glazed over, as if he doesn't recognize what is happening around him. The king calls him "friend," and asks how he came in, and the man is speechless.

If you've ever arrived at a nice restaurant without a jacket, you know they hand you one at the door. The garment here isn't about money or fashion. This man doesn't say he couldn't afford it. He has no account at all. He simply chose not to participate, not to be changed by what was happening around him. His body was at the wedding. His heart was not. This is a hard parable, and I won't pretend the ending isn't unsettling. But notice who he resembles. God called the Israelites stiff-necked, literally hard of neck, unwilling to turn. The calf was fixed. This guest is fixed. Meanwhile, God changes God's mind, and Moses bends toward the people. The God of Scripture is willing to be moved. The question is whether we are.

That is where Paul meets us. He writes to two women, Euodia and Syntyche, and we never learn what they disagree about. First-century believers had real conflicts, over who belonged, and what faithfulness looked like, and how this Jewish Messiah's movement would live among Gentiles. These were not small things. Yet Paul never names this

specific conflict or says who is right. Instead, he reminds them whose they are. Rejoice in the Lord. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. That Greek word “gentleness” means yielding, the willingness not to insist on every one of our rights. Be so gentle that everyone notices. The Lord is near, and God's peace will stand guard over your hearts, like a sentry, in the middle of the argument.

It's easy to look down on Euodia and Syntyche, but our disagreements are just as keen. Some of us struggle to hold Paul's virtues with one another in church, over matters that look small to outsiders and enormous to us. And this month, many of us struggle with it over politics. We are in election season, and the questions on the ballot stir fierce feeling in people who worship the same God and sit in the same building on Sundays. Some of us are certain one way, and the person two pews over is just as certain the other way.

So here is the question these texts press on us. Who, right now, is the person we would be perfectly content to let God consume? You know who I mean. Maybe someone on a ballot. Maybe someone sitting in a pew. Moses stood in the breach for people behaving badly by remembering that they belonged to God, that he belonged to God, and that God's priorities were bigger than the moment's anger. What would it look like for us to do that? To advocate for one another before God when we are behaving badly? To claim our shared identity in Christ when we disagree about how that looks in public life? - This week, say that person's name to God. Not to change them, not yet. Just to stand in the gap.

In a few minutes we will come to this table. We are all in the same banquet hall, and the same feast is set for every one of us. Each of us receives the same life of God, and with it, one another. We don't want to be the guest who forgot he was at a wedding, standing in the middle of the celebration, not clothed with Christ.

May we be a people who remember we belong to God, and equally belong to Christ's own Body. May our recognition of that relationship, and our participation in it, shape the way we live among one another, so the world will be blessed by the life of God among us.