

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor  
10/12/08

## "How to Make a Golden Calf"

### Exodus 32:1-14 (NRSV)

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." [2] Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." [3] So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. [4] He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" [5] When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." [6] They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

[7] The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; [8] they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' " [9] The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. [10] Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

[11] But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? [12] Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. [13] Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.' " [14] And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

### Philip. 4:1-9 (NRSV)

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

[2] I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. [3] Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

[4] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. [5] Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. [6] Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and

supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7] And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. [8] Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [9] Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

## PRESBYTERIAN FOUNDATION AND STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY

A week from next Thursday the board of directors of the Presbyterian Foundation will be meeting in our fair city. The Presbyterian Foundation for those of you who don't know is an organization that invests money on behalf of the church. Much of the mission work done in our local churches and in the larger church is made possible by the good work done by this foundation.

They have asked to use our church on Thursday night to hold a worship service because they want to remember why they do what they do, and they have asked me to preach.

And so I have decided to make this sermon do double duty. I will preach a version of this sermon today to mark the beginning of our Stewardship Campaign, and I will preach a slightly different version of this same sermon October 23 when I worship with the folks from the Presbyterian Foundation.

Quite frankly I wonder how I might change the sermon in response to some change in the financial crisis that is now facing our country. The news has not been too good recently, and I suspect some of you would rather not think about it any more. You probably have heard way too much about the financial crisis on CNN or CNBC, and I suspect the folks from the Foundation will probably have spent an entire day struggling with these very vexing issues, and maybe they don't want to hear about it either.

And I really do wish I could talk about something else today. When it comes to the financial crisis, I really do feel your pain because it is my pain as well. I'm like the member who told me that he just refuses to open that quarterly statement from his IRA because he knows it is bad news.

I don't want to think about any of this either, but I have to. It's not my fault. The stewardship chairman will quit if I didn't talk about money. It's that time of the year.

And surely the folks from the Presbyterian Foundation know all too well there is a real connection between the management of our money and the faith that we profess. How could I do a worship service designed to help them remember why they do what they do without mentioning money? It's just not possible.

## MONEY AND THE BIBLE

I like to quote Frederick Buechener's commentary on a famous biblical passage. He wrote, "Man does not live by bread alone, but he doesn't live very long without it either." And to paraphrase that I would also say, "Mission does not live by money alone, but it doesn't live very long without it either."

Some people think that we shouldn't talk about money in the church, that talking about money somehow makes us less spiritual. But, if we believe that then we are attempting to be more "spiritual" than the Bible. The Bible has never been shy about making a direct connection between what we believe and how we use our money or our possessions.

I'll never forget one of the first papers I wrote in seminary. It was for an ethics class based upon the book of Acts. For some strange reason I chose the topic "The Relationship between Economics and the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts." I knew that the book of Acts said some stuff about the Holy Spirit, and I thought I remembered a few passages that talked about sharing with other people. Maybe I thought it would be an easy, short paper.

But, nothing could be farther from the truth. I found that the whole book was filled with this connection between the economic and the spiritual. For some reason I was quite disturbed to learn that there was a very strong relationship between the economic and the spiritual worlds. I didn't want to hear that. I didn't want to connect money and the Holy Spirit. To me it seemed somehow unholy.

But, over the years I have come to recognize and accept this connection between the economic and the spiritual as an important biblical principle. It is a theme that occurs throughout the Bible. Remember, the Bible doesn't say money is the root of all evil. The Bible says that the love of money is the root of all evil, and that's the distinction we need to make as we seek to live as people of faith.

## THE GOLDEN CALF

Our Old Testament lesson is a good example. You all know the story. It takes place in the wilderness after God's people have been freed from slavery in Egypt. Moses has gone up the mountain to commune with God.

It has been a long time since Moses left, and the people are getting anxious.

I can understand their anxiety, really I can. Their only connection with the God of their salvation is through this man, Moses. He's the only one who has seen God face to face. He's the only one who is confident about their future.

But, Moses has been delayed on the mountain top, and the people in the valley below have grown restless.

Their fears multiply, and they begin to panic. In their anxiety they turn to Aaron, and ask for answers. They need to fill the void left by Moses with something, and the something they choose is gold.

They turn in their precious jewelry, their gold rings and their gold earrings, and Aaron melts them down and forms a golden calf. And the people worshipped this golden calf.

The people found a measure of comfort in this golden calf. It was something that they could see and touch. They were quite happy to accept Aaron's pronouncement that this was the god that had delivered them from the land of Egypt. Who needs the invisible God of an absent Moses when you can have a golden calf here and now?

## GOLDEN WALL STREET

It seems to me that in our anxiety, in our need to feel secure about the future, we often entrust our treasure to the gods of Wall Street. But, much to our chagrin, while we were communing with God on the mountaintop, they were busy melting down what was most precious to us and making it into an idol that is worth far less.

Our first reaction is to fix blame. The Democrats blame the Republicans. The Republicans blame the Democrats. The rich blame the poor. The poor blame the rich.

But, maybe, as some have suggested, we deserve some of the blame as well. Maybe there's a reason that we put "in God we trust" on our money. Maybe in our own way we all had a part in creating this golden calf; maybe we all donated a ring or an earring so our leaders could construct this monstrous idol.

We thought that we were so clever; we thought that we could create our own god out of money. But, once again we have learned the hard truth. And now judgment day has come.

We read about impending judgment in our Old Testament lesson. God tells Moses, "I'm fed up with these hard headed people. I'm gong to destroy them and start all over again."

But, Moses intercedes for his people. He tells God, "This will be bad for your reputation. You promised to save us and make us a great people. Please, reconsider." And, according to the Scripture God changes his mind. The Lord won't destroy the people who put their trust in gold instead of the one true God. The Lord shows mercy toward his people.

I've always been half amused and half worried about how in the Old Testament in particular God is often portrayed in such a human and judgmental way. God is going to lower the boom on this hard headed, stiff-necked people but then it seems like the Lord always allows one of his servants to talk Him out of it.

This doesn't seem like very God-like ... at least from our perspective.

But, I think these stories teach us in a very powerful way about the grace of God. God loves us so much that God doesn't give us what we deserve. Instead, God gives us another chance. God gives us an opportunity to turn from our worship of gold to the worship of the one true God.

It's a struggle. It will require us to change our ways. But, in the long run it will put us in a better place.

#### A NEW ANSWER IS NEEDED

George Soros has written a book recently about the bursting of a "super bubble" in the financial markets. Since this prediction seems to have come true he was interviewed by Bill Moyers about the financial crisis recently, and he had some great insight about where we needed to go from here. He said that the world economy up until now has been fueled by the consumption of the American people. We have consumed 6% more than we have produced and financed the rest on credit.

Well, now the credit has dried up and will not be coming back. The people of the world need to find a new way to do business. Consuming more than we create is not an option.

He suggested that we might work together to try and develop a more environmentally responsible way to live on planet earth. This would require tremendous investment, but it would take the world economy in a more meaningful and helpful direction.

I'm not sure if he's right or wrong on that one and if this recession will really be as bad as George suggests (after all this is George's third book on why the markets are going to collapse).

But, one thing is sure. When the gold has been melted down into a golden calf we know that we have come to a crossroads. We are required to go in a different direction or we will bring judgment upon ourselves.

As a pastor I have already begun to see the fallout from these difficult days, and in the next few months the real economy will begin to feel what the virtual economy of Wall Street has been telling us.

But, the question everyone is asking is this: what do we do? Where do we put our money? Should we buy a bigger mattress? How should we respond?

#### DON'T WORRY

This is one area where everyone agrees. Don't worry. That's the answer.

President Bush told us that anxiety breeds even more anxiety. Barak Obama said that now is not the time to panic. John McCain reassured us that the American people have the ability to rise to any challenge. And the ghost of Franklin Delano Roosevelt tells us as he told Americans in another time of transition, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself."

That all fits in rather nicely with our second lesson from Philippians. Paul told the Christians at that beleaguered church “Have no anxiety about anything.”

It can be somewhat reassuring to have our leaders tell us that everything is fine, that the fundamentals of the economy are sound. We can even quote this passage and suggest that it is a sin for us to be anxious. We’re not trusting God enough if we’re anxious.

Fine, let’s add guilt to our anxiety. That always helps.

An article in the Orlando Sentinel had some suggestions about how to reduce our stress. Turn off the TV, take a walk and go to a movie. I guess that’s not a bad start, especially that idea about turning off the TV.

But, surely there is something more that we can do. We need a better plan than walking the dog and going to the movies. Surely we need something more than just escape to the world of fantasy. When our Bible study first looked at this passage, someone suggested tongue in cheek that the choir might sing “Don’t Worry Be Happy” as the anthem. Is this all that we in the Christian community have to offer? Can all we say in the face of this crisis is don’t worry be happy?

We do indeed have much more to say in an anxious time, and it’s a very important message. Christians have always had a plan for the anxious times, and it is based upon what we believe as disciples of Jesus Christ.

## MUTUAL SUPPORT

First, we believe that it is our privilege and responsibility to take care of each other in good times and bad. The church has a long history of banding together and providing for the needs of all.

This was what first attracted people to the Christian faith when hard times came to the Jerusalem area. They loved each other in a practical way. They shared what they had with each other. And their willingness to share made the rest of the world take notice.

And I think the same kind of solidarity is suggested by what Paul told the Philippians when he told them, “Brothers and sisters stand firm in the Lord.”

In this same chapter (vv. 10-20) Paul tells the congregation at Philippi that he had learned to be content when he had a lot or when he had little. The key was trusting God to supply what he needed. Indeed, this very congregation in Philippi had been supplying Paul with what he needed during the time he was in prison and suffering for the gospel. For Paul their generosity in a time of need was a credit to them and to the power of the gospel.

I think that difficult times present a real opportunity for the church to proclaim the gospel in a powerful way. When everyone else is losing their heads and blaming it on everyone else, we have

the opportunity to be a community that is content and faithful with what we have. We can stand firm in the Lord, and share what we have and what we believe with others.

Let us remind each other that we are not in this alone. We stand with and for each other.  
DON'T BLAME

There's a second principle suggested by this passage that we need to remember in an anxious time. We need to be careful that our anxiety doesn't spill over into our relationship with others.

A time of great stress also brings with it a great danger of conflict. We can take our anxiety about things that we can't control and project those fears onto our personal relationships. This often happens in the church. Anxiety can be amplified by the group.

I wonder if that's why Paul talks about those two women who are having some kind of disagreement. Euodia (yoo od ee' ah) and Syntyche (soon too' kay) had been leaders in the proclamation of the gospel. But, now in this time of uncertainty with Paul in prison and the church facing persecution their disagreement was causing trouble in a church. It was not the time for petty disagreements and character assassinations.

Paul tells them to be of the "same mind in the Lord." In other words, don't let minor disagreements be amplified by the anxiety of the moment. Remember your higher calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Family therapy theory tells us that those of us who are called to lead in the church can help encourage this process by standing firm, by being a less anxious presence in a system that is filled with fear.

## COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Third, Paul tells us to focus upon what we have. He says in effect, "Don't worry so much about what you may lose. Instead, focus upon what you have right now." Rejoice in the Lord, and celebrate the grace of God. To put it another way, count your blessings instead of your problems.

Instead of listening to the talking heads on CNN all day long spend some time reflecting upon values that do not rise and fall with the stock market. What was it that Jesus said ... something about storing up treasure in heaven where neither moth nor rust nor bad loans can do any damage. It's something like that. That's not an exact quote, but you get the point.

Paul said, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." In a time of financial anxiety I can't think of something better to think about than Jesus' remarks about not being anxious about what happens tomorrow. God is near, and we can trust God to provide what we need each day.

It's amazing how when people take what they have and dedicate it to the Lord it turns out to be enough. But, when people hoard their wealth it always seems to become a curse. It becomes a golden calf that brings judgment upon the people.

Money is not good or bad. Money is a tool like a knife. A knife can be a very useful tool in a number of situations. It can also be a deadly weapon. In the same way our money can either be a great blessing or an instrument of destruction. It all depends upon how we use it.

## ASKING WITH THANKSGIVING

In some ways I guess this is a terrible time to begin a Stewardship program. All our talk about mission and money seems like one more burden on top of so many other worries. But, oddly enough in God's kingdom we don't escape worry by holding back or hunkering down.

Instead, we make our requests to God with a spirit of thanksgiving and anticipation. The tough times remind us of who we are and why we're here. And according to this passage of Scripture God gives us something that is priceless in this time of recession, a "peace that passes all understanding."

In the middle of the storm we have a rock; we have a purpose and a promise that enables us to stand firm.

When you think about it one of the things driving this current crisis is anxiety. Investors are worried about what the future may hold, and this causes them to act erratically. But, really can we ever predict the future? Can we ever really control our lives by investing wisely and having enough insurance?

I'm a very practical person. I believe in being prudent when it comes to finances and spending. But, it is wrong too believe that our ultimate hope is financial prudence.

Our ultimate hope is in the promise of life eternal as revealed in Jesus Christ. And it is the peace of God in Jesus that "guards our hearts and minds." The image is that of a sentry that stands watch over a fort. The peace of God stands watch over our lives. It is the peace of God in Christ that enables us to sleep at night and have hope for tomorrow.

## AN EXAMPLE

Paul concludes this section by asking the Christians at Philippi to follow his example. He said, "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

Three years ago I sat on a church committee that heard from a fellow minister who had been struggling with cancer. The church that he serves had been struggling as well, and they were asking for a grant from General Assembly to redevelop the church. We asked the minister about his personal struggle and the church's struggle and he replied,

“Right now I’m cancer free. The doctor said that if I had the kind of cancer the tests said I had, I would not be here right now. So, the only thing I can say about it was that the tests must have been wrong. It must have been a different kind of cancer.

I don’t know what the future holds for me or for this church, but we’re both going for broke. We’re spending all we have in faith. After all doesn’t our confession say that ‘in life and in death’ we belong to God?”

I remember being inspired by what he had to say. This church and this minister had big problems, but they had chosen to focus of God’s call instead of their fears.

This past year that same minister died, and that little church was full for his funeral. This will be a difficult time for them, but they have an example of faith in their former minister to guide them in the days ahead. They have the example of one who not only talked about his faith but also had an opportunity to live it.

That is the challenge for us in the coming year. Are we willing to “spend” all we have in faith or are we going to let fear dictate our lives? I guess the answer will depend upon what we really believe about life and death.

In life and in death we belong to God.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN](#)