

You might remember that in last week's Old Testament lesson God spoke directly to the Israelites in the wilderness, giving them the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God..."

Today we hear that "when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, they 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.'" Didn't take too long for that first commandment to be challenged, huh?

Moses had gone back up the mountain to receive a hard copy of God's law and commandments. Moses had evidently been gone a bit too long, though, and the people became anxious and afraid. Here they were, somewhere in the middle of the desert, not knowing what to do or what was going to happen to them. They needed some concrete assurance—even better, golden assurance—that everything was going to be okay.

Aaron could have used this opportunity to demonstrate his leadership. When the people asked that he make gods for them, Aaron could have with responded with a gentle but firm reprimand: "Remember! Remember! The LORD our God, who brought us out of slavery in Egypt, told us in no uncertain terms that we are to have no other gods before him, that we are not to make and worship idols, or there will be hell to pay. Remember! God promised us steadfast love to the thousandth generation if we live in love and keep God's commandments. Remember!" Aaron could have confidently spoken these words to the frightened people and perhaps averted a catastrophe. But he didn't.

Aaron must have been afraid too. After all, he had not had the same awesome, life-changing encounter with God that Moses had had at the burning bush. Aaron's becoming a leader in the great exodus had seemed a sort of afterthought that came to God only after Moses kept insisting that he couldn't speak eloquently enough; that someone more articulate than he was needed for this great assignment. Even after God said to Moses, "I will teach you what you are to speak," Moses pleaded, "O Lord, *please* send someone else." It was only then that God frustratingly said, "What about your brother Aaron? I know he can speak fluently... He can speak for you to the people." Aaron then heard the story second-hand from his brother, which certainly could not compare to Moses' awesome experience with God.

So, maybe we should show a little empathy when Aaron didn't respond to the people's fear-filled request with a strong show of leadership. Aaron probably had been getting really nervous having sole charge of the people who were becoming more restless and anxious by the minute in Moses' absence. He was probably thinking, "I've got to DO something—anything," so when the people suggested something that might pacify them, Aaron likely jumped up and with a great sigh of relief said, "That's a great idea. Gather up your gold jewelry and we'll make us a god." And sure enough, they did.

And there was hell to pay. When God found out, he got angry, and Moses interceded for the people. Then when Moses came down and saw the golden calf and the people reveling, he got angry, and his wrath resulted in the slaughter of thousands of the people, all in God's name.

Idolatry ultimately ends in death. We may not mold our gold into deities, but we certainly find other ways to worship our money and possessions. William Stringfellow, an

Episcopal lay theologian, lawyer, and social justice advocate active during the 60s and 70s, described idols as “imposters of God.” In other words, an idol is any person or thing or abstract notion besides God that we depend upon to make our existence morally significant, our life worthwhile. We believe that our virtue or worthiness depends on the devotion, service and elevation that we give to whatever the idol happens to be: wealth and status, worldly power, race, patriotism, work, religion. Can you think of other contemporary idols?

Although it may deceptively appear to, no form of idolatry leads to life, but rather to the suffocation of life—to the diminishment of human dignity, to the alienation of human beings from one another, from the rest of Creation, from God.

Now, let’s go return to the story and take a different tack. After Aaron made the golden calf, the people said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” The Hebrew word for gods used in this sentence is *elohim*, which in the plural form may mean “gods” in a generic sense, or it may mean a particular, singular God. Use of the word *elohim* might indicate a stage in the transition of Israel’s faith from a belief in multiple gods to a gradual acceptance of the one and only God, Yahweh. It’s interesting that Yahweh is the term Aaron used when he then proclaimed, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.”

We can find other possible evidence of the evolution of Israel’s faith tradition in and around our Old Testament lesson. For example, when Moses came down from the mountain and saw the golden calf and the people dancing he became really angry and he meted out punishment against the very people on whose behalf he had pleaded for mercy from Yahweh. Daniel Hillel observes in his book, *The Natural History of the Bible*, that the inconsistency in Moses’ attitude and behavior could be seen as a reflection of the inner struggle within the evolving faith of the Israelites, between the contradictory notions of a harsh God demanding absolute obedience and a compassionate God promoting patience, forgiveness *and* justice.

The principles underlying the Ten Commandments probably actually evolved gradually over several generations of trial and error, anguish, and soul-searching.

Just as we can see an evolution in the faith of the ancient Israelites, so our own Christian tradition has evolved, as have societal ethics, mores and norms. In our own country’s short lifespan, think about the evolution of attitudes and ethics around racial inequality or issues of gender and sexuality. Most countries have now abolished capital punishment, but in London in the 18th Century a little orphan girl was sentenced to death for stealing clothes from another child.

Attitudes, ethics, faith evolve. As individuals develop physically, mentally, and emotionally, our personal faith also changes and hopefully, develops.

James Fowler, a United Methodist minister and developmental psychologist at Candler School of Theology, authored a book that describes a series of stages that we generally go through in the development of our faith, be it Christian or otherwise. The first stage develops before language around the rituals of care, interaction, and mutuality, and it lays the foundation for later faith development.

The next stage of faith emerges in early childhood, and for good or ill, draws on children’s experiences of their parents or other adults to whom they are emotionally attached in the first years of life.

The Mythic-Literal stage then develops to help us order the world, to sort out the real from the make-believe, and to allow us to enter into the perspectives of others.

The next stage usually begins to take shape in early adolescence, and it allows abstract thinking and the ability to reflect upon past experiences and find patterns and meaning. Concerns

about one's personal future--one's identity, work and personal relationships become very important.

The next stage exhibits questioning, examining, and reclaiming or rejecting values and beliefs that we developed earlier in life, and it generally results in a stronger personal identity.

Around midlife often comes the stage of embracing and integrating opposites and polarities in one's life, of recognizing and accepting paradox. It involves coming to terms with the fact that we are both constructive and destructive, good and evil.

Development to the final stage, which could be called *enlightenment*, is exceedingly rare. The persons best described by this ultimate stage of faith have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community. They are "contagious" in the sense that they create zones of liberation from social, political, economic and ideological shackles that we tend to impose on ourselves. Living with felt participation in a power that unifies and transforms the world, they are often experienced as subversive of social and religious structures. Life is both loved and held to loosely. Many persons in this stage die at the hands of those whom they hope to change. They are often more honored and revered after death than during their lives. The rare persons who may be described by this stage have a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than most of us. *Remind you of anyone?*

We move through these stages of faith development at different paces, and we can get stuck in one of the stages and never progress any further. I think of Bill's sermon last Sunday in which he described a morality based on fear—the fear of retribution of one type or another. Stuck in stage two, some people remain there their whole life. Another example is faith characterized by a strong dependence on external authority and dogma, with clear lines of distinction between who's in and who's out. That's stage three, and some never move beyond it.

Bill also observed that knowing what's good and right and best for us also means that we know how to choose the opposite. If we know the truth, we can also lie. If we know the concept of fairness, we also know how to be selfish. We can't have one without the other. There's actually a lot of hope in this notion, because if we've worshipped idols, and most certainly each of us has, then we must also know God – we must know a great Goodness that is bigger than we are, a mystery that is beyond our understanding and control. In Christian terms, we realize that our lives are justified not by enslavement to work or church or wealth or status; but our lives are justified by God's unequivocal gift of Jesus Christ. It's the recognition and acceptance of this gift, Stringfellow says, that frees us from enslavement to the work of our hands or minds; that frees us to pursue our true human vocation—to live and live more fully in relationship to self, others and the whole of creation.

With that freedom comes the ability to do what Paul so eloquently encouraged the Christians at Philippi to do: to release our worries and anxieties, to live in prayer and thanksgiving, and to experience a deep peace, the peace of God, that peace which surpasses understanding. Amen.

SOURCES:

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