

Holy Cows

Exodus 32 — Philippians 4:1-9 — Matthew 22:1-14

The things we dwell on

In today's passage from Philippians, Paul asks his readers to focus on what is good. It is not a naive statement, because in those days people would have been surrounded by all sorts of difficult and ugly things. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. He had also been both a participant in and a victim of angry mobs, so he knew about darkness and difficulty. No, we don't focus on what is good to avoid the bad. We focus on what is good because doing so is a choice that draws what is good and pure and true towards us. By dwelling on what is good, it becomes part of who we are and it transforms us. And, in some strange way, we transform what we look at by how we see it. There is perhaps no escaping the dark things in the world, but we can choose what do dwell on.

The molten calf

In Exodus 32, Moses is up on the mountain. With their leader absent, the Israelites forget about God and start worshipping a golden calf. Gold is a symbol for material wealth. The calf, or young bullock as some translations put it, represents fertility and power. Taken together, both gold and calf represent the material world. The worship of the idol represents the false belief that material things can fulfill spiritual needs. When we focus on what is false and assent to its authority, we are always led astray.

Can you picture people nowadays dancing around with drums and cymbals playing, burning sacrifices and worshiping an object on a pedestal? The image seems ridiculous to me at first, but upon further reflection, it is not so absurd.

Nowadays, we all notice people are absorbed in their phones when they are out in nature or in the company of friends. We can see that through our entertainment we focus on messages that urge us to worship money or power or authority. Polls show the average American spends several hours each day in front of a screen, way more time than we spend playing sports or reading or meeting with neighbors. If we think about all the false beliefs out there which are so alluring, and to which we devote our time and attention to, then we may find that we're probably not so different from the people at the foot of the holy mountain who were anxious to worship something, anything, and forgetful of the sheer miracle of their deliverance from bondage.

Perhaps we could tell a literal golden calf from a distance. But most idols are more difficult to see. They are like illusions that lead us toward false ideas. How do we discern between a false belief and a true one? What are our golden calves?

The hanging Holstein

I used to work behind the scenes in Hollywood and over the years I watched many commercials being made. I have read that U.S. President Calvin Coolidge once said, "Advertising ministers to the spiritual side of trade." I hadn't considered it at the time when I was driving trucks, but the advertising industry has a spiritual mission. That mission is to take

spiritual needs and convert them to material wants so that money can be made. The people in Exodus had spiritual needs, but it was the material gold and the symbol of fertility and strength that drew them away from the truly spiritual.

I want to tell you about one commercial in particular. The location was a parking lot in downtown Los Angeles. The ad was for some brand of breakfast food. The concept was elaborate. A number of Holstein cows were brought in and the idea was to have a crane hoist the cows off of the ground and film them dangling in midair, suspended by a sling and wires. A Holstein heifer probably weighs 1,500 pounds and is not anatomically fit to be lifted ten feet off the ground by a crane. When they went to lift the cows off the ground there were a lot of painful mooing and the pressure on the cows stomachs sent cascades of manure shooting down onto the hot pavement. It was a sunny day, in the lower 90s. Just imagine what it was like to be there with shovels and trash cans waiting to collect the steaming mess.

Now this commercial was filmed in parking lot, but there was a massive green screen used as a backdrop. This meant that a beautiful farmland could be digitally inserted in post-production. After plenty of effects, the commercial would portray a stack of cows, standing on top of one another, perhaps in an idyllic green field, and there would be a funny punchline. The reality was anything but funny, especially if you love cows.

All this was done to make a fifteen or thirty-second commercial. A commercial is nothing more than colored light and sound that tells a short story. The story is intended to make the us viewers desire something and then fulfill our desire, by buying that thing. Now, I don't know about you, but I don't need a commercial about food to give me an appetite. Food is something that sells itself. But food companies need to advertise their products because the food companies want to take the basic needs of people and convert them into monetary deals. We are sold the belief that a product is in some way "enriched" and better than the real thing fresh from a farm. Or we are sold the convenience of not having to cook or take responsibility for our nutrition ourselves. It's almost as if advertisements sell us "golden calves" that make us believe we are doing the right thing.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with a commercial in itself. What I am concerned about is that when we focus too much of our time and attention on things that are unreal or portray a false belief in some way. The more we do this, the more difficult it is to discern truth from fiction, needs from wants, health from disease. And it is not just the one commercial. It is the many. The average American sees between 4,000 to 10,000 ads a day. Now we're in golden calf territory.

The stuffed calf

I don't want to dwell too long on that subject, other than to say, we need to encourage our loved ones and ourselves to get back to the business of living in the present and not devoting ourselves to these screens.

I have one more short story about a cow, and this one is altogether different.

Some years ago, Rahel and I were in Ethiopia and visited a family who lived in a small mud and thatched cottage in the Ethiopian countryside. It was like stepping back to Biblical times. No roads, no electricity or running water. People raised animals and grew food. It was a bright mid-afternoon, but inside the cottage it was dark, lit by only a small fire and the light from the doorway. The floors were dirt and the benches around the wall were made of an adobe-like hard packed mud. In the course of conversation, our host took down from the rafter where it hung, a shabby artifact, something the size and shape of a large dog. It had stiff legs and hair that looked like it had been coming off in patches for some time. We couldn't tell by looking, but soon discovered it was the remains of a baby calf that had undergone some kind of homespun taxidermy. I waited while our laughing hosts told the story to my wife's cousin Teddy and he translated the Amharic to English for me. It turns out, the calf had been stillborn and its mother had, as a result, refused to produce milk. The farmers, searching for a way to salvage a bad situation, had stuffed the calf and brought it to the mama cow, hoping its scent and likeness would somehow convince her to lactate. Crazy as it sounds, the ruse worked and the mother cow was biologically induced to start giving milk. It was a great win for the farmers and a great story, which had obviously been told many times with pleasure. We all laughed and passed the calf around for a while, admiring the handiwork and ingenuity of the farmers.

As bizarre as it was, I found something sacred in the farmers' story. They may have been poor by western standards, but they had a wealth of creativity. Their creativity helped to feed their family, and the story of the calf retold, continued to produce joy.

Looking back I can't help but compare that farmer's story to the commercial. The farmer's story was positive, life-affirming and even instructive. The commercial's story created an illusion designed to generate profit for a company selling a product. There was little, if any, intention of feeding anyone a healthy and necessary meal.

It is a difficult task sometimes to discern between what is good and what is false. Idols, illusions and narratives call us into relationship with false beliefs and draw us away from what is true, beneficial and benevolent. It is an ongoing effort to seek what is truthful...

Invitation to the feast

In the Gospel reading today (Matt 22:1-14), we have people invited to a feast. Many of the invited guests don't show up. They have something more important to do and make excuses. Maybe there was a good show on TV. Maybe they had to go home to do some online shopping. What is important to you? Our culture invites us into many illusions and false ideas. Yet we are also invited to God's feast. We have an open invitation to enter into holiness at every moment of our waking lives. Our actual worship takes place in the day to day. Our encounters with God are in those daily moments. Our sense of worship is determined by what we focus on and how we choose to see it. If we look for the good and the holy, it will transform our lives and the world around us.

So, **"⁸ Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if**

there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you.” (Phil. 4:8-9) Amen.