

20th Sunday after Pentecost

“When being Codependent is Good”

22 October 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Exodus 33:12-23

“Assumptions are the termites of relationships” (Henry Winkler).

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Hear the day’s lesson for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost:

¹² Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight.

Consider too that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴ He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵ And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” ¹⁸ Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” ¹⁹ And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹ And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Exodus 33:12-23).

Some might call it a discussion, others an argument. Whatever it was, Moses and God were having a heated conversation about the relationship between God, Moses, and the people of Israel. Exodus 33 trails the Golden Calf story—not a high point of Israel’s connection to God. After liberating Israel from Egyptian slavery, Yahweh began a special connection with the people. Yahweh called them to be God’s “treasured possession,” to be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:4-6). God had delivered the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), and instructions on building the tabernacle (Exodus 25-31). God had even promised to dwell amidst the Israelites—the tabernacle being a discernable sign of God’s presence (see: Exodus 25:8; 29:45-46). The tabernacle was a sort of portable Mt. Sinai. Just as God’s glory rested on the mountain in a cloud, so would God’s glory fill the tabernacle (Exodus 24:16; 40:34-35). God would be present with the people in a real and material way as they traveled through the wilderness. Let’s look at what this conversation looks like, but first a story:

There is a famous Hassidic story about the sage who came home from the synagogue one day and found his nine-year old daughter crying bitterly. He asked her what was wrong and she told him, between sobs, that she and her friends had been playing hide-and-seek and when it was her

turn to hide, she hid so well that they had given up on finding her and went off to play another game. She waited and waited for them to find her, and finally after about an hour, had come out to find herself all alone.

As the sage comforted her, he mused to himself, “I wonder if this is how God feels. He threatened that if we abandoned his ways, he would hide his face from us and deprive us of his presence. I wonder if God has managed to hide from us so successfully that we have given up looking for him and have gone off in other directions. I wonder if God feels lonely and abandoned. Why is God so hard to find in the modern world (Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God?: Fireside*, 2002, p. 183)?

Our lesson concerns Yahweh and Israel, with Moses somewhere in the middle. By the time we readers arrive at Exodus 33, we discover that the people have botched the whole divine-human covenant relationship rather badly. In venerating the Golden Calf, Israel has forfeited its unique connection to Yahweh. This betrayal hurt and angered God. Consequently, after that infidelity, Yahweh changes God’s mind about that relationship:

The LORD said to Moses, “Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your descendants I will give it.’ I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people” (Exodus 33:1-3).

Yahweh has decided to send an angel with the people of Israel, but Yahweh is not going with them “or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” Yet Moses prevails upon God to change God’s course and Yahweh agrees to accompany the people after all.

Pressing his good fortune with Yahweh, Moses then requests for just “one more thing.” Moses asks: “Show me now your glory” (Ex.33:18)! First Moses had asked to see “God’s way,” but now he asks to see God’s glory. Perhaps this first appeal is to discern the depths of God’s activity. Yet this second request attempts to perceive Yahweh’s central principal or the full exposure of the divine person—and God will have none of that! No one can see, nor understand, the fullness of Yahweh.

I suppose we could say that God’s glory and God’s face amount to the same thing. Moses desires to see the whole divine package, but that is something that this Yahweh God will never allow. This is the great divide between God and humanity.

Despite this reality, Yahweh does allow Moses to see God’s back—which is more than anyone else will see. It reminds us that no matter how near we feel to God, we can never see God’s comprehensive essence. This God both shows God’s-self and obscures God’s true spirit simultaneously. This is a brilliantly enigmatic portrayal of a God who reveals/conceals all at once. And . . . although we can never understand the fullness of God, we can accept the divine invitation to ask God to walk with us to the extent we can experience God’s presence and spirit.

A long-retired clergy colleague tells a story about a Swedish immigrant who worked hard in America and saved his money for a trip back to Sweden to visit his relatives in the old hometown. He booked passage on an ocean liner. Before the ship sailed, he laid in an ample supply of cheese and

crackers. To economize, he lived on that simple fare morning, noon, and night. All the way across the Atlantic, he ate cheese and crackers.

When he walked on the deck, he often saw other passengers going into the fancy dining room, and envied them their good fortune, but he also knew he could not afford the fancy meals. On the last day at sea, when he could no longer look at another cracker, he decided to splurge, and he went with the other passengers to dinner. After the sumptuous meal, he approached the steward to pay the tab. It was then he discovered to his vexation that the meals were included in the price of the trip. He could have been at the banquet table every meal instead of in his room nibbling on cheese and crackers.

People can eat cheese and crackers if they wish, but we are all invited to a banquet. Anyone can come [Bauknight, 3/6/94].

Sometimes we experience the gospel in Old Testament, just as we do in the New Testament. The gospel is more than a set of propositions for us to figure out. The gospel is not a religious hammer to thrash and batter people into submission. The gospel is not a sentimental story to make us feel deeply the pain and grief of Jesus. No! No! No! The gospel is God's invitation to live life and live it abundantly—whether one is in the wilderness or even in Salado, Texas.

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