

GOLDEN CALVES
Psalm 51: 1-10 Ex 32:7-14
I Tim 1:12-17 Lk 15:1-10
Pentecost 17 9/11/16
Shepherd by the Sea Episcopal/Lutheran Mission, Gualala, CA
Pastor John Moren

Exactly fifteen years and a few hours ago, this day became infamously known for, likely, the rest of our history, simply as Nine-Eleven.

Two planes were hijacked by terrorists in what can be seen, logistically, as a **skillfully** orchestrated and **perfectly** executed exercise in mass murder. Two other planes also became airborne, with one succeeding in its mission of murder, while the other was foiled by a few men who, knowing they were to die, took the aircraft **from** the hijackers and crashed it into a field.

2,977 persons, including 400 police and firefighters . . . together with 125 in and around the Pentagon, and 45 on the fourth plane were killed in those attacks. Four peace-time commercial airliners were turned into lethal guided missiles and carefully aimed for targeted murder.

Thus the impetus to the unending war on terror, which has created **more** victims without resolving anything, except to create more terrorists. As the bumper sticker proclaimed, “We are **making** enemies faster than we can **kill** them.” As a matter of fact, 90% of the terrorist attacks in the United States are carried out by non-Muslims and are, in reality, committed by the far-right fringe, including far-right **Christians**.

Since Nine-Eleven more than One Trillion Dollars have been spent to protect the United States from poison attacks, terrorist attacks and airline security. These are but the most **visible** targets of that investment. Most of this trillion dollars, by all measures, was hastily spent on ill-advised schemes, programs and failed technology. These expenditures are piling up daily by the millions. One trillion is a million million, a thousand billion. If you were to count, one number per second, it would take 30,000 years to get from one to one trillion. One trillion dollar bills laid end-to-end would encircle the earth more than 4,000 times.

Whether this money has been well-spent or not is defined by who’s ox got gored . . . or not. If you were one of the contractors who parlayed America’s **fear** into your company’s **ledger**, you’d be hard-pressed to say the money was ill-spent. However it may well be honest to suggest that Security has become one of the nation’s Golden Calves.

Awful as the abject tragedy of Nine-Eleven is, together with the aftermath of expanding hate, fear and bigotry which it spawned, it is well to put that infamy into perspective with **other** national tragedies which, like a superb made-in-America-rifle, keep on repeating.

America, to its shame, boasts many Golden Calves.

In the United States last year 30,700 persons suffered alcohol-related early deaths, a statistic which, like the rifles, keeps on repeating with deadly, steady monotony. Annually, almost 10,000 persons die as the result of drunk driving. An additional thousand persons **under** the age

of 21 are killed by drunk drivers. More than 30,000 persons are killed **by guns** each year, a monumental achievement which is 25 times greater than any other developed nation in the world. Every day seven persons **age 19 and under** are killed with guns, making an annual total of more than 2,500 murders of those too young to die . . . and old enough to be slaughtered. Lastly, more than 1,315 persons die **each day** from smoking, totaling 480,000 per year. The United States is the **unchallenged, unquestioned leader** and **perennial victor** in winning Gold Medals in the Olympics of Unnecessary Death and Murder. No **other nation** comes even **close** to America's records. The United States always stands on the center dais.

America's Golden Calves are well-bred with impeccable pedigrees, and extremely well fed with a stubborn tenacity that knows neither boundary nor common sense.

Nevertheless, the iconic pictures of the burning Twin Towers have, rightfully, indelibly etched their way into our collective memory. Would that we, like the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki . . . like the Jews who survived the Holocaust . . . like the millions of survivors of vicious genocides . . . like the multi-million progeny of slavery and Jim Crow . . . would that **these**, and **we**, would never forget.

In addition, would that **we** also **forever remember** the many **methods** that have been developed, refined and deployed for the express purposes of ongoing suppression, mayhem and murder.

...

When faced with statistics like these, **David's seduction** of Uriah's wife, together with his contriving to **murder** Uriah, seems to be nothing more than mere **child's** play, a **teen-ager's hormones gone viral**, an insignificant blip on the computer screen of history (II Sam 11:1ff).

All of which might have been slipped under the rug of artful cover-up if it had not been for the prophet Nathan's finger-pointing condemnation of the king: "**Thou art the man**" (II Sam 12:1ff).

Without Nathan, I wonder, would David **ever** have penned the 51st Psalm?

His conscience, which had been really **dull** until that moment, became **sharpened** by a simple story about a wealthy farmer who took a poor man's **only** ewe-lamb, really, a family pet, rather than to take but **one** lamb from his **own huge** flock to slaughter for the meal of hospitality (II Sam 11:1ff).

An interesting aside is how this story begins: "In the spring of the year, when kings go forth to war . . ." Apparently then, as now, war was an ongoing **habit** . . . made **boringly normal** by continuous use.

page 3

Because of the prophet, and **only** because of Nathan's whistle-blowing, do we **have** this Psalm .
.. and **David's** cries become **our** cries:
Have **mercy** on me, O God . . .

The **agony** of his soul **screams** out with every word:
Blot out my transgressions . . .
Wash me thoroughly . . .
Cleanse me . . .

The king did not plead for a sponge bath using soft-soap and No More Tears shampoo . . . rather he **demand**ed from God a scrubbing from head to toe . . . with soap like today's mechanics use, containing a lot of pumice . . . grit that scars and scratches as it gets rid of the grease and grime of dirty work . . . and deep-cleans well below the skin all the way to the heart of the matter.

This was no lame pseudo-apology like we get from today's politicians caught in flagrant adultery: "I made a mistake."

Relentlessly . . . **painfully** . . . the verbs continue without letup . . .
I **know** my transgressions . . .
My **sin** is ever before me . . .

David knew both the **present-time** victim, and the **ultimate** victim of his selfish barbarity . . .
Against **thee**, thee only have I sinned . . .
Thou art **justified** in thy sentence . . .
Thou art **blameless** in thy judgment . . .

David also knew the impossibility of **himself changing** his condition . . .
I was brought forth in **iniquity** . . .
Thou desirest **truth** in the inward being . . . (and, unwritten, "**I** cannot provide truth")

Only **then** . . . only **after** his brutal honesty with God . . . only when he finds he doesn't have a leg to stand on . . . only **then** can David turn to **plead** with God to be made **whole** again . . .
Purge me with **hyssop** . . . (a plant used in rites of purification . . .)
Teach me **wisdom** . . .
Fill me with **joy** and **gladness** . . .
Hide thy face from my sin . . .

Then, finally, the critical moment for conversion . . . the moment of humble confessional **truth** speaking to the **power** of sin . . . **begging** . . . **pleading** . . . on bended knee . . .
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Would that we might learn from David . . .

...

page 4

Backtrack to Exodus . . .

Moses had led his people from slavery . . . from making bricks without straw . . . from the brutal whip of the taskmaster . . . Moses brought his people from Egypt and they were on their way to The Promised Land.

Nevertheless . . . they found much to complain about . . .

. . . the water tastes **terrible** . . . (had they moved to Davis?) Ex 15:22ff)

. . . we're **starving** . . . at **least** we had **bread** in Egypt . . . (Ex 16:1ff)

. . . we're out of water **again** . . . did you bring us here so that we might die of **thirst**?
(Ex 17:1ff).

. . . and, worst of all . . . there's an **army** close behind us . . . ready to **kill** us (Ex 17:8ff).

Human nature is such that, no matter the **blessings** . . . **curses** all too quickly follow . . .

Look hard enough . . . or look hardly at all . . . we can **all ways** find much to crab about . . .

For a **few**, it seems, the glass is half **full** . . . for a **majority**, it **also** seems, the glass is forever half **empty**. Later in their journey **Joshua** demanded of his people, "**Choose ye** this day whom ye shall serve" (Josh 24:15). Joshua did **not** need to add **another** command: "Choose ye this day what ye shall complain about."

Not too long after these gripes, God called Moses to the top of Sinai to give him, among other major instructions, the two tablets. Hidden by the clouds, the people could neither **see** Moses nor **understand** what was going on . . . and they grew weary of waiting . . . (Ex 24:1ff). This was, I suspect, the first fulfillment of the well-known prophecy: "Good things take longer." And especially, I suppose, if one is chiseling words into stone without a hammer.

Now the people had **more** to complain about . . . and, appealing to the brother of Moses, they asked Aaron to make a god who could be seen and touched, a **visible** god who would go before them. Aaron, the opportunist, asked for all their jewelry . . . then melted and molded it into a golden calf. Not only **that**, Aaron **also** built an **altar** and proclaimed that **this** idol was the god who led them out of Egypt. The pressure for popularity by any means is really hard to resist.

All if which did not sit well with Yahweh . . . who told Moses that God would see to it that the people were properly punished . . . "My wrath will burn hot against them and I will **consume** them." (Ex 32:10ff). Which became the same challenge for **Moses** at Sinai as Sodom and Gomorrah were for **Abraham** (Gen 18:22ff). Sensing God's wrath, each of these leaders began to bargain . . . Abraham moved God down from 50 righteous to ten, thereby becoming the prototype of the first used-car buyer in history . . . and Moses, pleading **not** by the numbers, appealed, rather, to God's **moral** ethic . . . **Abraham** failed to produce ten . . . **Moses** made the better bargain and prevailed . . . (Ex 32:11ff).

page 5

Like good attorneys, these two great leaders were **willing to argue** before the Supreme Court of The Most High . . . we, too, have that **same** privilege . . .

In anger, Moses **broke** the tablets, which had been carefully written by the finger of God (Ex 32:15ff) . . . **melted** down the golden calf . . . **ground** it to dust and **forced** the people to drink the water upon which he scattered the residue.

Allegiance to the Golden Calf had replaced their allegiance to God . . . and bitter was the taste. Not only that, by **Moses' command** the apostates paid with their lives (Ex 32:25ff). Sin inevitably sows, then grows, the seeds of its own destruction. And **still** Moses attempted to bargain with God . . . **this** time without success (Ex32:35ff). God had had enough. There inevitably comes the time when penalties are assessed and the loan comes due. And when the loan of life is called . . . like the rich farmer of a few Sundays ago . . . "**this night** thy soul . . ." (Lk 12:13-21).

...

Golden Calves need no invitation from us . . . they simply present themselves like Bathsheba sunning on the roof, and, with or without intentional malice, they come with alluring, naked promises. If discretion is, indeed, the better part of valor, we readily throw caution to the wind. Like Liza's father, in "My Fair Lady" . . . "with a little bit of luck, when temptation comes we'll give right in."

The list of Golden Calves is long and getting longer without letup . . . we'll never run out of them . . .

Corporate profits trump morality at every turn . . . strip mining . . . mountaintop removal . . . automobile safety . . . each of these are done, or not done, to place profit over people. The mining companies have made it very clear that they will destroy **everything** and anything so long as the result can be inked in black on their accounting sheets (Wendell Berry, The Nation, 4/6/15, page 145). Consider **one policy change** that would **end** poverty in America. The collective assets of the top One Per-cent is \$23 trillion dollars. That's 92,000 times around the earth. If **this cohort** paid but **2% tax** on that wealth they would **probably** still have **almost** enough to live on and they might continue to get richer just a bit more slowly. That 2% tax, however, would generate about \$500 billion per year. The Think Tank, Demos, calculates that to bring every person in America above the poverty line would cost \$193 billion. That leaves \$300 billion left over for other things of vital national interest . . . (The Nation, 8/15-22/2016, page 29).

We define our enemies as those not like us, then sacrifice them on the altars of bigotry.

page 6

America's obsession with individualism over community . . . "I've got mine . . . to hell with yours . . ." Writes Wendell Berry: "Corporate industrialism has **failed** to sustain the health and stability of human society. It has **destroyed** communities, neighborhoods, families and small farms. It has **failed**, and **more dangerously**, to conserve the **wealth** and **health** of **nature**. To live **now** as if one is **alone** – and, as if **profit** is the **only** commandment chiseled into stone – is to condemn every member of the (world-wide) human community to an **irreparable** world and to an **irremediable** want" (The Nation 4/16/2015 page 146).

The Calves continue to copulate and reproduce . . .

White privilege is ours . . . it's a Golden Calf we can't get rid of, and it's really difficult to recognize. It is thoroughly ingrained in our DNA **merely** by our **history**. It's the result of the "sins of the fathers" being visited upon the third and fourth generation" (Ex 34:7ff). To it, we willingly bow down.

America's absolute and intractable obsession with guns . . . all the while insisting upon the right to misinterpret the Second Amendment to one's own advantage . . . and to the subjugation of the **already** disenfranchised. There are about **235 million persons** in America over the age of 18 (2010 census). There are **350 million guns** in America, and about 15 million more are added annually by manufacture or import. That's about 1 1/3 guns per person over the age of 18 . . . how many, I wonder, does it take to carry for one's own protection.

Since Nine-Eleven, together with other massacres, **personal security** has become an imposing Golden Calf. Into the vacuum created by **fear** have jumped numerous scams to help us pretend we are safe. Bullet-proof **backpacks** for kids and bullet-proof **clothing** for the **entire family** are finding a ready market. The problem is that **these methods** will, very likely, produce only **more fear** without making **anybody** any safer. FDR was right in his first inaugural: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself" (1933). The projected fallout of all this hype is that we will become a nation consumed by paranoia . . . looking over our shoulder with every step, all the while we trip on the curbing put there to guide and protect us. Reality's nothing. Perception's everything.

Alcohol is both gift and scourge . . . we joyously celebrate the gift . . . nor can we ignore its savage scourge.

. . .

There will be other tragedies, to be sure. Vengeance, vendettas and vindictiveness are permanently encoded into our DNA

page 7

In addition, I suspect that each one of us can name a few more personally-crafted-and-engraved Golden Calves which we nurture as pets . . . or which we worship at the altars of our favorite sins. It has ever been thus. The Tree at The Center of The Garden is still alive and growing healthier day by day . . . and the fruit thereof is almost impossible to resist. Some one will always be sunning on a roof nearby . . .

Is there no way out?

Are we ignoring the Nathans whom God is sending our way? Or might we, ourselves, **be** Nathans?

I personally have no hope that our elected leaders will **ever** grind into dust any of the nation's Golden Calves . . . vested interests forever prevail over the common good.

Perhaps the **least** . . . perhaps the **only** . . . thing we can do . . . is to recognize our eager allegiance to Golden Calves . . . fall on our knees and pray with the sin-consumed king . . . “Have mercy on me, O God . . .” and, as well, pray for those whom we have elected to serve in our governing bodies, even though they are often the gatherers . . . the melters . . . the moulders and the craftspersons who create, and sustain, our national Golden Calves with the very jewelry taken from those whom they were elected to serve.

And conversion? It can only begin with each one of us and it will come as we humbly pray:
“Create in **me** a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

Amen.