

“Fangirling God”

Sermon by Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Exodus 32:1-14

Matthew 22:1-14

If you were here last week, you heard the Ten Commandments as read in the lectionary texts. You may remember that the second commandment mandates: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

Well, while God and Moses were having a long chat on top of Mount Sinai, the Hebrew people at the foot of the mountain got tired waiting for Moses. They told Moses’ brother and spokesman, Aaron, “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.” Aaron does something he probably shouldn’t have done as a leader: he worked to accommodate the desires of the people rather than remind them what it is, and who it is, they stand for. And so, Aaron melted down the people’s gold and formed for them a golden calf saying, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

What were these stiff-necked people thinking? They had already heard the Ten Commandments-- after writing down the covenant as God revealed it to him, Moses built an altar at the foot of the mountain, sacrificed some oxen as a well-being offering to God, put half the blood of the oxen in a basin and dashed the other half upon the altar, then read to the Hebrews the book of the covenant God had revealed to him, then dashed the rest of the blood upon the people to seal the covenant. With that kind of dramatic fanfare, we can’t say the people were unaware of the expectations set

upon them! And yet still they woefully disregard the second commandment as they build their own idol to worship.

In my research on this story, I have found some bible commentators who show sympathy for the Hebrew people in their disobedience. Kathryn Matthews says, “If Moses is there, God is with them, and if Moses isn't there, well, obviously God has left them on their own. And most of us don't like to be left on our own, especially in the midst of a wilderness, without some clear goals and an action plan, not to mention a healthy dose of reassurance that everything is going to be okay. This is definitely an anxiety-producing situation.”¹

Other commentators, such as Walter Brueggemann, suggest that there may have been divergent schools of leadership in those early leadership days, and Aaron modeled a way of interpreting God through physical symbols, while Moses modeled a way of interpreting God through something less tangible. For Aaron, it wasn't that he was leading the people to worship another god; as we can see in Aaron's words, he presents the golden calf to the people as the god(s) who had brought the people out of Egypt.

The people were anxious, and what Aaron presented offered an immediate way to soothe their longing for God in an uncertain time.

We aren't that different from Aaron and the Hebrew people, waiting on God, if you think about it. If you look at the world around us: raging wildfires in California; mass shootings; the threat of nuclear war; catastrophic storms that reveal the hard truth about the damage we have done through global warming; genocide in Myanmar; fake news; and a political leadership that feels increasingly untrustworthy. Like the Hebrews, we are waiting, and we may also ask, “Where is God?”-- not

¹ Kathryn Matthews, “Sermon Seeds, Oct. 15, 2017” on *United Church of Christ Sermon Seeds* http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_october_15_2017

because we don't believe in God, but because we have a deep longing for the God we know to be liberator and savior, and yet we do not see this God.

Like the Hebrews, some of us try to anesthetize, or make numb, our longing for God by reaching for something nearer to remind us of God. I call this fan-girling God. If you are not familiar with this term fan-girling, you should be, as it has been so much a part of popular culture that it has been added to the Oxford Dictionary: to *fangirl* something is "to behave in an obsessive or overexcited way". While "fangirling" would seem to implicitly be used to describe girls only, I can assure you that men and boys have their moments too: I remember that my little brother, when he was in high school, was so infatuated with The Dave Matthews Band that when he heard that Dave Matthews would be staying at a home in my brother's friend's neighborhood while on tour through Atlanta, my very straight brother actually knocked on the door and left flowers and a letter of adoration for the lead singer and his music. But that was 20 years ago. Today, teenagers come of age in a world that is saturated with media. They may fangirl over celebrities, but it could also be over characters in books-- which can spinoff into the fascinating world of fan fiction, or personalities on social media, or just about anything. I overheard some of our confirmation youth, both boys and girls, talking about fangirling while they were at their overnight lock-in. I asked one of them-- who wishes to remain anonymous but allowed me to share their words-- what it is like to fangirl something. Here is what that youth said:

"Being a fan of something can be both disappointing and fulfilling. Usually, when you first fan over something, you obsess over it for a few days, trying to get close to that person or group in different ways by watching, reading, or doing anything that reminds you of their work. For example, if you like a Youtuber, you watch all of their videos, satisfying you only for a few moments. When you run out of those videos, you're left with this weird mixture of eagerness and disappointment to watch something that'll never

satisfy you again. So the fever dies down and you move onto someone else, still waiting for the first person to publish something that'll satisfy you. It's a never-ending cycle of being satisfied and unsatisfied."

If Moses had not ground the golden calf into water, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it, I think this golden calf would have left the Hebrew people in a never-ending cycle of being satisfied and unsatisfied, eagerness and disappointment, fulfillment and emptiness-- much like our idols leave us today, whether they are found through screens, through addictions, or through the idolatry of money-- think of that golden bull that stands, and gets revered, at Wall Street today.

But how *do* we find a connection to the God we long for, when we cannot see or touch this God? What do we do when God feels absent to us?

I turn now to Jesus' strange parable about wedding attire. In it, a king is holding a wedding banquet for his son. The first tier of guests simply ignores the invitation. They don't show up. Then the king orders another invitation be sent out, making clear to his messengers that they tell everyone that this is going to be one amazing party. But these people made light of the invitation and went off to their ordinary business; however some even acted violently on the slaves the king had sent as messengers. At that point the king just decides and tells the slaves-- go out into the street and invite anybody and everybody, good and bad. Finally, the king gets people to his son's party! So on some level, we can appreciate this parable as one that chooses broad inclusivity over elitism. Sounds like good news! All would be fine and good if the parable ended there, as Luke's version and the Gospel of Thomas version do... *except* in Matthew, the king flies into a fit of rage because one guest showed up without a wedding robe.

I do not think this parable is so basic as to say God cares what you wear. I noticed a story last week about a 9 year old girl who bought a brand new

white pantsuit to wear for the first communion she had been preparing for at Catholic School-- until the nuns informed her that she would not be allowed to receive Holy Communion unless she was wearing a white dress, like the other girls. Too bad she didn't go to a church like ours, where we were established on the value of having a Communion Table open to any who feel called to eat and drink at it. I believe God does not care what you wear to church; God's just happy that you show up.

Samuel Wells suggests that first century Christians would have heard the word "robe," and thought immediately about the robes of baptism². He suggests that this parable means that all-- Jew and Gentile-- would be invited to God's banquet, but once you receive the mantle of God's mercy, you have to wear it. When you wear a baptismal robe and get baptized, the waters symbolize an access to God that never runs dry. These waters become the undercurrent of your life, from which you are called to drink whenever you feel spiritually thirsty. To accept this robe brings you into a connection to God that may be symbolic, but is a connection more real than anything you could fashion out of gold, more reliable than whatever brief delights refreshing your screen might give. Like the covenant etched into the ten commandments, the baptismal waters also form a covenant between us and God but unlike the commandments, it does not require that we be worthy in order for it to bless us.

To me, the baptismal robe symbolizes of trust. Trust is the key to any lasting loving relationship. We have to trust when we are around our loved one that we are worthy enough to be with them. We have to trust that they will show up. We have to trust that when our faults are exposed-- and they will be!-- we will not be dismissed from the party. Trust means that when we do not see immediate action from God we do not turn to the closest shiny thing to satisfy our deep needs. Trust does not come easily. But thankfully God trusts us enough to invite us, offer us a robe, and call us. Many will be called, but few will be chosen.

² Samuel Wells, "Remade: Matthew 22:1-14" in *Christian Century*, October 7, 2008

