

# Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

GOLDEN CROSS, BLOODY CROSS

Exodus 32:7-14

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19)

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

7 The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely. 8 They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf and have worshipped it and have sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" 9 The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10 Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them, and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation. 11 But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Author's Exegetical Note: I am indebted to Brevard Childs' commentary on Exodus, and to Everett Fox's translation and notes in The Schocken Bible. Chapters 32-34 form a mini-unit around the themes of sin, forgiveness, and covenant renewal. Chapter 32 may be divided into three further units: vv. 1-6, the Golden Calf; vv. 7-14, God's anger; and vv. 15-29, Moses' anger. Further usage of the Golden/Molten Calf incident is in 1 Kings 12:25ff, Ps 106:19-23, 1 Cor. 10, and Acts 7:35ff. The Golden Calf story in Exodus has its literary roots in the reign of Jeroboam I (northern kingdom) who made two calves, one for Bethel and the other for Dan, in order to entice people not to go to Jerusalem to worship (1 Kings 12). Jeroboam's idolatry is symptomatic and paradigmatic of Israel's (and our) unfaithfulness that only God's forgiveness and covenant renewal can address (Exod. 32). The present text focuses on Moses' mediation of the problem. The Golden Calf event at Sinai is one of countless examples among God's people showing that God's consuming wrath is delayed in full by God's mercy but without forgetting Israel's/our enduring sin.

## DIAGNOSIS: Self-Corruption

### Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Religion as Calf-Making

The Golden Calf was a representation of YHWH, the God of Israel (32:4-5, 8). It was made with human hands of the finest material available (in our eyes). Making the calf represents "religion" symbolically and paradigmatically. For us Christians, the Golden Calf has become a Golden Cross. Not just the shiny ones we often wear around our necks but the ones that perch atop our churches, adorn our windows, and beautify our godly standing in society. We built a substitute leadership of bishops and elders while waiting for Jesus to return. We built a powerful empire lasting a thousand years, and built countless cathedrals. We revel (v. 7) in our own religion so well that we splintered it into a

thousand pieces! Our Golden Calf/Cross is wound tightly into the fabric of our religion: in new and better interpretations of our Bibles (present company included), in our church governance which we claim speaks for God, in our local church temples which witness to our self-absorbed worship habits, in our bland as cardboard mission statements, in our fund-raising guilt-trips, in our evident godliness because we are concerned with social justice, in our insurance policies and our golden parachutes, in our picture-perfect lives and picture-perfect children, etc. All of this is our own making, and all of it is a lie in one form or another. But, all golden crosses look pretty, don't they?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Stiff-Necked God "sees" all that, and yet "sees" (v. 9) deeper still. We are incorrigibly sinful to our very core, "stiff-necked" (v. 9), unable to see anything except what we want to see. We want to sin so badly that we cannot wait to express it. Our first parents sinned before noon on their first day in Eden (as Luther whimsically put it). We built that tower into the heavens before we knew we could never reach it. We built that golden calf at Sinai because we needed something to worship. We wanted to worship YHWH our way, and did not believe that Moses would ever return from the mountain (32:1). Thus, every "calf" we make is tangible evidence of our failure to trust in God, and thus also in one another. We continue to build our religion out of the depths of our faithless, "uncircumcised" hearts. Our text calls this self-absorbed revelry "perverse" (v. 7), and so it is.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Wrath of YHWH YHWH will have none of it! It stokes his all-consuming "wrath" (v. 10). And yet God does not release the fullness of his all-consuming wrath upon us. Why? Because YHWH is not alone in the world (v. 10)! The sorry story of our Golden Calf/Cross is temporarily resolved but not settled through the intercession of Moses [and many others throughout history] who remind (v. 13)

God of his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel. Because God is righteous in his "own self" (v. 13), YHWH our God and Father stays his fury and keeps his promise to Moses (v. 10). But our God would not, could not, withhold his wrath forever (see 32:34).

#### PROGNOSIS: The Way Home

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Bloody Cross  
From a human perspective it seemed that God has "changed his mind" (v. 14) time and time again by "passing over" our incorrigible sinfulness. But at the right time, God unleashed the full fury of his wrath, not upon us but upon his Son, in order that we might live "by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). By God's own intercession are we saved (from the wrath), costly and bloody as it was. This is the kind of forgiveness that Moses' intercession could not obtain. Our assurance of forgiveness came when God raised Jesus from the dead. By Jesus' resurrection we are assured that he is indeed the messiah of Israel, the king of the Jews; and therefore, on that bloody cross where God's wrath met our sin, God made good on his promise to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham's seed (Gen. 12:3; Rom. 4).

#### Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Remembering the Cross

The enduring question ever since has been: Since Jesus is the messiah, where is the messianic kingdom? Answer: Like Jesus himself, the messianic kingdom is unrecognizable except to the eyes of faith. The messianic kingdom, in which sin and death are defeated, originates for us in the scandal of the cross: that bloody intercession where Jesus accomplishes the forgiveness of sins (past, present and future) by receiving the wrath of God in his body, not ours. Faith (or trust) in Christ Jesus embraces the bloody cross as God's means of forgiveness, for us and for

the world. The cross, and hence the messianic kingdom, is our assurance that YHWH, in Messiah Jesus, is not far off in heaven or in our gilded temples (that is, not in any place that we can control) but in the lives of those who trust in God alone. The kingdom, then, belongs to those who “remember” (v. 13) the Bloody Cross and God’s promise that is attached to it. Here, “remembering” means to bring our past into the present by recalling (to faith, to trust, to believe, to pray), again and again, that God’s promise is already fulfilled for all time, and that Jesus’ cross never was pretty.

#### Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Not Made with Human Hands

The messianic kingdom is the resurrected body of Christ throughout time, created and sustained by the Spirit of God. This “body of faith” which is not alone in the world, cannot be handled or manipulated or killed. It is not made with human hands but with the love of God. This love, that is, Jesus himself, is unrecognizable to the world but rather makes its appearance in ordinary lives that are changed by faith. The kingdom of such lives cannot be gilded over. It becomes tangible, so to speak, at the point at which God’s mercy confronts sin and death; that is, when one person begins to trust another person unconditionally (unlike when we failed to trust in Moses). Yes! In this encounter (there are countless), the one who trusts will experience a dying, and the one who is trusted will begin to experience life “abundantly” (John 10:10). In this moment, our golden calf begins to die and our bloody cross begins to shine in the life of the other. In this moment, the messianic kingdom reveals itself in the world through suffering as well as joy. Is it not sheer joy to be trusted (see 2 Cor. 5)? Nor will it be surprising to see the messianic kingdom in more overt acts of love. Such love, such trust, such prayer, such commitment to God and to the beloved other cannot

be manipulated or “engraved” like all the other idolatrous “calves” that we continue to make, yet it is more precious than gold or even one’s own life. It is utterly reliable because God raised Jesus from the dead. That is the kingdom of God, and our way home.