

Naming the Golden Calf in the Room

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Peer Pressure¹ – tendency to pick a side, or, as leader, to seek a quick solution. COVID brought a great deal of peer pressure, if we think back that far to consider it. Some politicians were inclined to declare that the pandemic was over, when they knew very well that it wasn't. They paid a high political price for that, and, worse, they caused a great deal of harm to many who died or were harmed significantly by the short-sighted policies.

So, I'm wondering today, when did we, you and I, last feel peer pressure? Don't try to tell me that adults don't experience peer pressure, for there are always social pressures among our peers – friends and family – that might compel us to do things we might not choose to do on our own.

Just yesterday, I was driving Benjamin to a friend's home. There aren't too many Halloween decorations on display, but I was amazed to see, suddenly, a little cluster of homes all with decorations up. Peer Pressure.

Taylor Swift, yes, she is certainly a talented artist, but to me she is an even more brilliant entrepreneur who effectively uses peer influence to saturate the market with her music. It isn't just kids, youth, and young adults who pay a fortune for concert tickets; there are many parents I'm aware of who end up going to a Taylor Swift concert because their teenager wants to go. Peer pressure can be expensive.

I have been quiet on social media lately with the spike in violence in Palestine and Israel. It is tempting to sound off, to offer cheap political opinions about this complex issue, but I do want to say that I have seen a great deal of piling up on one side of this war. Make no mistake, Hamas deserves the condemnation. I think, however, that emotions, and yes, peer pressure, obscure rational thinking – causing an historical amnesia among us, preventing us from remembering how the Israeli government has evaded criticism in spite of its policies for decades that have purged millions of Palestinians from their homes, killing and arresting thousands with little accountability. There is a bigger picture that is not named in the media narrative I hear right now.

What is unfolding in Gaza and Israel is definitely complex, and heart-wrenching. Have you felt like we have been here before? That's because we have been here, those living with death and destruction have been here before, and they will be again and again until politicians stop dancing around the facts with their public statements – they need to name the *golden calf* in the room. We accept short term solutions that benefit the people we like, rather than the messy, longer term, tedious, work that invites everyone's voice to be heard.

Good News to me, and I share it with you; when I was in the West Bank, the people I admired the most were Israeli citizens, Jewish folks, who stood with the Palestinians. It was a risky action, to cross the border from Israel into Palestinian land, and even riskier

¹ The broad concepts in today's Message thanks to the Commentary on Exodus 32:1-14 by Zina Jacque. October 15, 2023, workingpreacher.org. Found at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-exodus-321-14-8>

for Israelis to join Palestinians in peaceful demonstrations – planting olive trees and facing down Israeli authorities who controlled the vast majority of the West Bank.

It is messy to talk, to listen, to compromise – to name the golden calf in the midst of a conflict. There is no more complex place to truly work toward peace and justice than in Palestine and Israel. Thankfully, there are people who see that truth. It's just that they are not being listened to.

Peer pressure. I think our most authoritative leaders might be more susceptible to social pressures. Where else might we be able to name the golden calf in the room around us these days?

Imagine the unenviable job of Moses, trying to reason with the Creator of heaven and earth atop the mountain! But, does his brother Aaron not have just as difficult, even complex, a role with the Israelites down below? Listeners judge Aaron, but instead we should use him, and the situation he faces as a golden calf is born, as a mirror to reflect back to us truths of our modern reality, our culture, our psychology. Go back and read the story more closely, and we will see that Aaron never agrees with the people's quick solution of creating a calf-god. Popular opinion has turned against God and Moses – the people want a god that is accessible, easy to touch, answers arrived at more quickly. Essentially, they want a deity who agrees with our aspirations and desires.

Don't we all, from time to time, when we get impatient, opinionated, irritated, or paranoid? Remember some of the absurd and extreme viewpoints that were expressed during the pandemic, and sometimes how politicians placated those people with short-sighted policies.

Aaron, to be truthful, is in an untenable circumstance. What, if, hypothetically, he asserted himself, spoke with prophetic rage, reminded the Israelites that the God who liberated them from slavery in Egypt is not this calf, but the God who has been with them through all their struggles? Our relationship with our Creator is often not an easy one, or intimate enough to keep us engaged. No relationship is easy. That mob around Aaron would not have bought this rationale, with their politics, the peer pressure – and that shiny golden calf right in front of them.

Naming the Golden Calves in our lives does not solve the problem, of course. But accepting the truth that adults are not above social pressures is a beginning, like Aaron and that mob of impatient Israelites.

Jesus, the nonconformist religious leader, faced those pressures among the religious elite. After all, the Torah, the Jewish Law, was grounded in community, and recognized the importance of harmony among God's children – love God above all deities, love your neighbour as you yourself. But that love, Jesus said, is not grounded in *being liked*. Fact is, the love Jesus calls his followers to live out is dangerous – it creates conflict at times, because it has no conditions placed upon it. It requires us to love everyone, no exceptions.

Love, that irrepressible force that compels neighbours to destroy the walls, to cease the violence in order to love God in that neighbour. The golden calf continues to command attention in the world, but Torah love, the love that Jesus reinforced, is the Christ-love we particularly see in the neighbour whom we might call an enemy. Amen.