

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
 Year A, RCL
 North Fork Ministries
 October 11, 2020
 Old Testament:
Exodus 32:1-14

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "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 said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 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 worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 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."

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? 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. 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.'" And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

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 As we heard in the reading from Exodus this morning "And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." I hadn't attended a Sunday School class in 20 years. But having barely survived a disaster of my own making, I found myself once again back in church, and eventually walked into an adult Christian Education class. Gathered in the church library was a typically varied assortment of Episcopalians, reflecting a wide range of ages, classes, races, and sexual orientations. I remembered how

in the Baptist church where I had grown up, folks who attended adult Sunday School classes were grouped together according to sex and age. This was clearly different. As I took my seat, I received a nod and a smile from a face I hadn't seen in almost a decade and certainly didn't expect to see there. It was my master's thesis advisor – a Harvard PhD, author of a widely read international relations textbook, and one of the most brilliant men I knew. I no longer remember the topic under discussion in the Sunday School class. What I do remember was the question my advisor posed that morning, "I wonder if God changes God's mind?"

Having been reared in a Christian education setting where asking such a question would likely get you slapped down, I was taken aback by the proposition. Even proposing the idea of a God who changes, flew in the face of the image I held of a God who was omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. Why would a God who knows all, sees all and is all-powerful need to change her mind about anything?

But here we have it – one more instance in which the people of Israel turned against their God. And as a consequence, God promised to destroy them. And then as the narrator in Exodus tells us, "the LORD changed his mind."

One of my theology professors in seminary, an ardent feminist, would always call me down when I would accidentally refer to God using a masculine pronoun. After repeatedly incurring her wrath and too frequently receiving red marks on my essays, I eventually overcame the habit of calling God "he", or referring to "his" actions or characteristics. It seemed a small thing at the time, but by altering my practice of referring to God in masculine terms, my conception of God changed over time as well. I began to imagine God in broader terms, more easily conceiving of a God with a feminine face, more ready to think of a God of compassion, love, understanding, gentleness – traits which seem to come more naturally to women than to men. It's God's willingness to change, that we heard in response to Moses' plea that God change God's mind and not bring disaster on the people of Israel, that once again brings to mind God's feminine side. At the risk of stereotyping, it does seem to me that this divine trait of changeability and a willingness to be moved by spirit is more characteristic of women than it is for we more often dogmatic, rigid, and stiff-necked men.

In his book called *The Evolution of God*, Dr. Robert Wright argues that God, or at least humankind's conception of God, has evolved through the ages from the god of the hunter-gatherer, to the god of the tribe, to the god of the chiefdom, to the god of the nation-state.

The gods of the hunter-gatherer were really just bigger and more powerful versions of the humans that imagined them. They lacked morality, yelled at their human subjects, castigated them for reasons as quirky as combing their hair in the midst of a storm or for gazing upon mating dogs.

Dr. Wright regards the god of the Hebrew Bible as not much better, describing Yahweh as a warrior god, often behaving savagely, insecure when confronted with the faithlessness of his people, and ready to commit mass murder in order to demonstrate his mighty powers.

Wright doesn't let Jesus off the hook either, claiming that when Jesus talked about loving your neighbor, he really just meant that. Neighbors were those who lived next door. And that the sermon on the mount, containing the beatitudes "blessed are the peacemakers, the meek, the pure of heart, and the merciful" were added to the Gospel of Matthew some years after Jesus' death and that it was later the Apostle Paul, who extended Christ's invitation to the Gentiles, who moved Christianity away from an exclusive tribal religion and toward a Christianity based on love, compassion, and justice for all the world's inhabitants.

I think I will leave it to Biblical scholars to sort out the exact historical sequence of events that have led us to a faith where love for God and love for our neighbor are intricately linked and at the foundation of our expression of religion.

But it is worth taking seriously Wright's contention that human history is moving in an increasingly moral direction, arguing that as technology grows and we become more connected globally, we move naturally toward mutually beneficial human relationships. Likewise, Wright argues that as we move in the direction of "goodness", our conception of God moves toward the good, the expansive, the inclusive. Religion becomes less narrowly focused on the well being of only "those like us", those who believe like we do, act like we do, and look familiar. Wright says that each of the Abrahamic faiths become more moral as they are compelled to interact, and that this "expansion of the moral imagination reflects a higher purpose, a transcendent moral order." Every encounter, every potential conflict is actually an opportunity to bring into realization the promise of the kingdom of God.

This "ever widening circle of morality", a vision of humankind that is moving, albeit unevenly, toward an increasingly moral universe is much like that described by Isaiah, and echoed by John the Baptizer, where "the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

As a people we are moving forward toward a realization that we are one, that we are all a part of the One, and that when one suffers, all of us suffer, and the joy of all creation is our joy as well.

Now I will admit that it has been that it has been a little tough these past few years to hang on to a faith in the progress of humankind toward that which is good and right and just. With leadership in our country that seeks to divide rather than unite us. With hugely destructive wildfires raging in California and record numbers of hurricanes brewing in the Gulf of Mexico, we have to wonder what

damage we humans are doing to our environment. And with a pandemic that doesn't seem to go away, it's hard to believe that we are moving in a positive direction.

Still, I am convinced that we, you and I, and all humankind are included in God's ever-widening circle of compassion and love. We have a role to play in living into God's promise. Whether that role is in the checkout line at IGA, when you cast your ballot for elected officials next month, in the work you do for the good of the community, we all have the opportunity to break out of the limiting confines of our tribe and find communion.

As one of my favorite characters in American fiction, J.D. Salinger's, Seymour Glass said, "I think there is a conspiracy to make me happy." God is part of that conspiracy – a collusion of forces, allied to move us all toward that which is good, just, and beautiful and blessed. We are asked, as Jesus followers, to join in that conspiracy.