

Exodus 32:1-14. Context. After God pronounced the first set of stipulations for covenant relationship (commonly known as the "Ten Commandments"), the people begged to be dismissed from God's presence, finding it too much to bear. Moses heard the rest of what God had to say about how they should to live with God and each other, and then told it to the rest of them. They gladly agreed to abide by the provisions of God's covenant. Shortly after that, God invited Moses up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone containing the covenant. Moses remained on the mountain for 40 days and nights, leaving his brother Aaron and the rest of the people to their own devices.

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.

Reflection. No sooner do the people agree to abide by the Ten Commandments than they eagerly and joyfully break the first two: no other gods, no graven images. Is it irresistible that we should worship the creations of our own hands, the less-than-eternal stuff that fills our lives? Does it ever satisfy our deepest longings? God had good reason to be angry. But Moses convinced God that it's in God's own self interest not to destroy the people. So God backed down. Great way to start a relationship, isn't it?

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23. Context. Psalm 106 concludes the 'third book' of the psalms (90-106) and forms a complement to psalm 105. There the psalmist had rehearsed all the wonderful things God had done, starting with creation and continuing through the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs and the liberation from Egypt. In 106, the psalmist recalls that for all the blessings that God showered on the people, they were rebellious and ungrateful, dragged "kicking and screaming" from Egypt to the promised land. But in the end, God's love would overcome God's anger. This week's reading reflects the episode of the golden calf.

Praise the LORD! O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Who can utter the mighty doings of the LORD, or declare all his praise? Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times. Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people; help me when you deliver them; that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation, that I may glory in your heritage. Both we and our ancestors have sinned; we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly.... They made a calf at Horeb and worshiped a cast image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. Therefore he said he would destroy them-- had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

Reflection. Like the Israelites, we find ourselves drowning in a roiling sea of cultural influences that are nearly impossible to resist in our daily lives – materialism, the desire to be in control, to live as though God didn't exist. They come between

us and our call to proclaim the good news and to live it out in self-giving love for all God's children and in husbanding the blessings of God's creation. But God is a God of grace, of second chances. For all of our failures to live out the gospel of Jesus, we must always remember that God will give us another chance.

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Philippians 4:1-9. Context. The Christian community at Philippi seems to have been most supportive of Paul's ministry, and the most expressive of the love and unity that resulted from their fellowship in the Gospel. This week's reading from chapter 4 returns to the theme of joy, a joy that comes from knowing God's love and grace. He urges harmony among the members. "My loyal companion" is probably Epaphroditus who delivered this letter from Paul to the Philippians (2:25-30). The "gentleness" of which Paul speaks is perhaps better understood as "generosity" or "consideration for others," a characteristic that Paul has already attributed to Christ himself. Finally, Paul assures the Philippians that if they set their minds on noble things, and the character of Paul's own life, then the God of peace – of wholeness, contentedness, completeness – will always go with them.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Reflection. A popular song some years ago proclaimed "Don't worry, be happy." But that's pretty hollow advice and life can be pretty scary if we don't already have the assurance that God loves us. Our true happiness - our joy - is knowing God's love as we experience it through our relationships with others: it's not based on having stuff. Think on these things as you read your quarterly 401k statements!

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Matthew 22:1-14. Context. This week's reading is the third in a series of three parables that in Matthew's version Jesus used specifically to condemn the Jewish leaders who rejected him and sought to kill him. The first two have in view the leaders of Jesus' day, and the third has in view the leaders of Matthew's day following the destruction of Jerusalem. Again, Matthew has transformed Jesus' original parable (see the version in Luke 14:15-24) into an allegory. So, in this version the invited guests who refuse to come (=Jews who reject God's word, namely the Jewish leaders) abuse and kill the slaves (=prophets) of the king (=God) who come to remind them that it's time for the wedding banquet (=the messianic age/kingdom of God). In response, the king destroys their city (=Jerusalem). Then slaves (=now, evangelists) bring to the banquet all whom they find, good and bad (as in the church). But the one without a wedding robe (=one who has responded but who is not "clothed" with the deeds of true Christian living) is cast into the outer darkness (=the last judgment).

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

Reflection. It's a good thing to accept God's invitation to follow Christ whatever your circumstances, however far from God you may have wandered. But it's not enough just to show up at God's party, it's not quite "come as you are." As the saying goes, God loves you too much to leave you the way you are. Can you hear the challenge?