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Adams UMC
All Saints Sunday
November 3rd, 2019

First Taste: Moses and the Golden Calf

Exodus 32:1-14

Focus: We too, just like the saints before us, are always dependent upon the unchanging grace of God.

Function: The function of this sermon is to remember the grace of God which has led, leads, and will lead the saints and us into healing and redemption.

Will you pray with me and for me: God of our ancestors, we thank you for the example of the saints in our lives. We thank you for your grace which sustained them and which sustains us. Lead us into your love which never changes. Move us to share that love with others—so we may be perfected in your great love which encompasses us and your great cloud of witnesses. May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips be acceptable and pleasing in thy sight, oh God, our strength and our redeemer. Speak, Lord Jesus, for your servants are listening.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.

In the book Revelation, when we turn to the 7th chapter, John the Seer paints a very beautiful image. He details to us a vast multitude of people from every corner and facet of the earth, standing side by side, singing praises to God—who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are standing shoulder to shoulder, every color, every creed, every nationality, every socio-economic status, every way in which we divide and label each other...everyone is there. Standing, waving palm branches, clothed in white, one community worshipping and praising God. This vast multitude is so large, John doesn't even try to count—the text literally says an immeasurable, vast multitude—singing in a loud voice that salvation and honor and glory belong to God and his Lamb, who is Jesus Christ. This, my friends, is the company of heaven—the great cloud of witnesses that the author of Hebrews speaks of. This vast cloud, this great company of heaven, are the people who have passed on before us that span a millennia who have run their race and are now resting in the eternal peace that comes from the One who makes all things new. I know, if you have a good memory, you know I spoke about this image last All Saints Sunday—but nothing can beat this image, can it? The great cloud of witnesses—a vast multitude of the saints who have gone before us—the saints who were also sinners, like you and me—who knew and understood that we are dependent upon nothing else but the unchanging grace, mercy, and love of God who is the One who creates, who is the One who redeems, and who is the One who perfects things in all encompassing love.

Our story this morning, while not the most popular story or text to preach from or talk about on All Saints Sunday, has a lot to teach us about the saints—the great saints of our faith and the great saints who have breathed life and taught us the example of Christ in our personal

lives. Like most of our stories that we've covered in this *First Taste*, sermon series, our grander narrative starts a while back. And this time, a while back. The book Exodus is really just one grand story. A story of liberation, of freedom, of salvation, of grace, of redemption, of healing, of hope. One could say it is the archetypal story of not only Israel—but the church. The people of Israel are enslaved in Egypt. God has called Moses to liberate them. We know the story of the plagues. After the plague of death lands upon Egypt, Pharaoh lets the Hebrew people go. The Reed Sea splits, and Miriam sings her song of praise when her people reach the other side. They head toward Mt. Sinai. Moses heads up the mountain now the people are afraid. Moses has been gone a long time. They are wondering what has happened, so they approach Aaron, Moses's brother, and ask him to make them gods that will lead them out of the desert and into a land they can call home.

I want us to pause here for a moment. It's easy to laugh and judge those in our story. **But, and we've talked about it before, do we not do the same thing?** In moments where we're scared, in moments of life that are difficult, in moments of life where we don't know what to do, do we not turn and try to create other gods? How often, do we rely on ourselves to carry us out of the mud? Do we not turn to the gods of addiction, work, greed, or pride when our ego is challenged, when life gets painful or tough, or when fear encroaches? Not only that, but do we not expect others to lead us or offer us our salvation? How many times do we believe that a certain author, a certain sports team, or a certain politician will bring us joy or make our lives full and whole? We fashion our own gods all the time. We make gods of our family, out of work, out of money, out of power, out of addiction, out of happiness, out of things, out of our very own leaders. In the midst of our fear and uncertainty we too make gold calves and expect them to lead us towards salvation.

The people have asked Aaron to do this, and he does. He makes a calf out of the gold the people have with them. **And, as they worship, God burns with anger.** God tells Moses that the very people God just rescued are now worshipping an idol. What is an idol? An idol is what we just described above. It is something—anything—even something that is perceived as good that we use as a replacement for God. But, it goes even further. We use idols to try to control the actions of God that only God has. The people wanted to be led to safety—they wanted salvation. But, they didn't want to trust in the very God who just rescued them. Fear took hold, just like it always does, and they make an idol thinking that the idol will bring about salvation. But, only God can save. Only God can make things new. Only God can bring about wholeness and complete healing in our lives. Only God and God's amazing love can liberate and set us free from the bondage of our hearts. So, God tells Moses that God is going to restart the project. Moses and a select others will make it to the promised land, but no one else will. God is fed up—already.

As Moses hears this, he argues with God. He literally defends the very people who just made a covenant with God that they would only worship Him. And, as he argues, God changes God's mind. That's what the text says. God changes God's mind. What does that mean? Can God really change God's mind? Doesn't that go against God being the same yesterday, today and tomorrow? Doesn't this go against the predominant understanding that God doesn't change? But...what if that understanding is wrong? After all, this isn't the first time someone argued with

God and God changed God's mind. In fact, Scripture is filled with accounts where God changes God's mind. What if, it's not that God is never changing...but that God's love is never changing? What if it's the understanding that in all things, God always pursues life, healing, wholeness, and redemption? What if its not that God never changes—but that God's love, mercy, and grace are the constant that never changes. After all, love itself, demands change. Love itself demands that we change, because love means we are opened to relationship and relationships change us. God can change God's mind because God's love opens Godself up to new possibilities of relationship and healing. God's mind may change, but God pursuit of mercy and healing and love will never cease. God will always act, even change God's mind, in order to be true to God's holy and perfect love.

And, here's the thing. That is a lesson that we need to hear time and time again. The great saints of our faith and our lives learned this lesson over and over again. This wasn't the first time the Hebrew people, Aaron, and Moses messed up and it certainly isn't the last. And, while God became angry with them again and again, God's grace and love remained the same—never changing, never relenting, always seeking to redeem, transform, and make all things new. The great saints of our faith learned this lesson. The great saints of our lives learned this lesson. We have learned and will continue to need to relearn this lesson—that we are all dependent upon the holy and amazing grace of God. God can change God's mind. We can argue and cry out and debate with God. But, God's love—the mercy of the One who made the heavens and the earth, will never fade away. It is the only constant we have in our lives—and it is the only thing that make us whole, that can bend us back towards God, that can remind us all of the original goodness we were created with.

On this All Saints Sunday, as we remember the great cloud of witnesses, remember how they pointed us to the healing grace of God. We often like to put the saints of our faith or of our lives up on a pedestal and think that they were without failure. But, they messed up, time and time again—like you and me. Their lives are a testament to the grace of God—just like our lives are a testament to the grace of God. After all, it is only by the grace of God in which we are healed, in which we are redeemed, in which we are reconciled, in which we are made new. While they struggled at times and while we struggle at times—in the midst of our struggle, God's constant love and mercy is there, leading us out of our sin and brokenness and into the perfecting and healing love of God—who holds us and all of the great cloud of witnesses in his arms of mercy and everlasting peace. Thanks be to God!

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.