

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
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Do any of you remember flip phones? This is, of course, before the super-computers most of us have in our pockets or purses. But I'm thinking of the simple, joyful, little phone that folded in two like a clam and opened up with a satisfying click? Flip phones were great, and I miss them. I remember one particularly vibrant advertising campaign for the Motorola Razr. It was sleek, shiny, red, and I really wanted it. Like, really wanted it. I was in seminary and working as a nanny. I had no business buying a phone that cost two weeks' pay. But did I buy it? Of course, I did. And I'll tell you. That gorgeous little phone fit so nicely in my pocket, and it let everyone around me know that I was really, really cool.

The ad campaign promised me a lot. The people who used that little red phone were attractive, confident, happy, sexy, and presumably, wealthy. The campaign was trying to get me to believe that the only thing holding me back from those things was a little phone for the bargain price of \$200 in 2004 prices. The campaign swallowed me up, and I bought the phone. I may even have worshipped it a little. It arrested my gaze.

The Old Testament knows a little something about idols. We've been following the Israelites for several weeks—out of Egypt, into the wilderness, and now at the base of Mt. Sinai, waiting for Moses to come down after his conversation up at the summit. The Hebrews haven't seen God for a while. They're getting nervous because they remember seeing God in the cloud of smoke during the day and in the pillar of fire at night. But at the moment, God seems pretty far away. And, wouldn't you know it, one of them has a great idea. They decide to take all the gold from all the people in the tribe and melt it down. Then, famously, they craft it into a calf to be worshipped. And, by the way, Aaron, the priest, helped them, so don't think that the clergy are any better when it comes to idolizing. When they felt like God was far away, they simply made another.

If this isn't our human condition, I don't know what is. We can make a god out of just about anything, really. For me, it's phones. I left the Razrs a few years ago, but I've been worshipping at the temple of the iPhone for quite a few years now. It's so slim and attractive.

Theologians talk about idols as things that “steal our gaze.” It's kind of an old-fashioned definition, but I like it. Something that will not release our eyes. It might not be phones for you like it is for me. Maybe it's power. Money. Beauty. Perfection. Sportscars. I have no idea. But I'm guessing that if you give it a look, you'll see in your life some kind of idol.

Last week, I talked a bit about the human capacity to choose the wrong. And I think this idol stuff is related. When confronted with a living, majestic God or a golden calf, we often go for the calf. I wonder sometimes if that's because we feel a sense of control about the idols. Somehow, they are more manageable than the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Maybe God can seem too big or too scary, and the idol cozier somehow.

Regardless of the reason, just like our Israelite forefathers and foremothers, we have a tendency to get trapped by things that have little importance, things that have no life. And sometimes we need a Moses to come down the mountain and say, “stop it.” Stop doing this to yourselves. Stop fooling around with the idols when the living God is right here.

Moses wants the people to remember God, to ditch the calf. Which is, of course, what we ought to be doing. Ditch the calf. The grace in the story is this: God loves those stiff-necked, former-slaves anyway. God loves us even when we’re finding new idols new left and right. God keeps God’s promise to be our God anyway. Even when the Hebrews forget their rescue from Egypt. Even when we have no memory of our salvation. When we find ourselves false gods. My prayer for us today is that we will always have a Moses to tell us to stop it when we’re falling a little too in love with the things that aren’t God. May we receive as many reminders as we need about the one, faithful, living God. Amen.