

“Stay Hungry, Stay Faithful”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park on October 9, 2011

Text: Exodus 32:1-14, Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

I am a walker. I walk whenever and wherever I can walk. I don't mind that my office is upstairs, and we do not have an elevator. I do not mind the stairs to the fifth floor at West Suburban Hospital, either. I welcome any opportunity to walk. The problem is that I get grumpy when I cannot do my 12,000 steps a day. I understand that when you experience anxiety if you are unable to do a certain activity or use a certain substance, you are an addict. Being grumpy and being anxious are not exactly the same, I would like to believe, but I am afraid that I may be a mild version walkaholic!

I hear that over 23 million Americans struggle with addiction. We live in a world ridden by fear and anxiety. Many in our society feel restless and under stress. Many feel the need for something, anything, to help them cope with the stress and assuage their anxiety. And many try to find that something wherever they can. Some drink, others eat; some shop, others gamble; some work, and others exercise. They try to do these excessively, in unhealthy and destructive ways, to forget their pain and find some rest and relief.

Well, in our Old Testament lesson today, we find a people in a similar situation. I admit that their world was not exactly 21st century America, but, similar, nonetheless. They were fearful and anxious, like many of us. They were insecure and lonely, like many of us. The Israelites were in the middle of nowhere, wilderness wherever they looked. They were on a journey to somewhere, like most of us, but they did not know exactly where, and they neither had a clear direction. And, their leader, Moses, was absent from the camp. They knew that he was at the top of the mountain, talking to God. But, it was taking forever! At the bottom of the mountain, people were getting impatient and anxious. They did not like the interminable waiting. They could not bear that absence, that void. They thought they were left on their own. They thought that they needed something, anything, that would function as their god to see them through the anxious times.

As our lesson begins, we find the Israelites rallied around Aaron. *"Do something,"* they said, *"Make gods for us, who will lead us. That Moses, the man who got us out of Egypt -- who knows what's happened to him?"* Then, they collected all their gold jewelry, melted it down, and made a little golden calf – a small, portable, and malleable god. They made a god which they could carry around and bend and shape into whatever they wanted it to become. Taking in the situation, Aaron built an altar before the calf and announced a day of feast. People offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices. And they sat down to eat and drink and began to party.

Pathetic, isn't it? How foolish, ridiculous! And what a coward is this Aaron, Israel's priest and the brother of this man, Moses! The Israelites violated the very first commandment: *You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.* They breached the covenant with their God who had delivered them

out of the land of slavery. They replaced the God of the universe, Creator of heaven and earth, with a small, portable, malleable god, which they could manage and manipulate.

Thousands of years separate us from this story. And, we are not exactly wandering pilgrims in a wilderness. Yet, I wonder whether this is something that is still happening here and now, in our lives, in our world. Emptiness remains widespread, haunting our lives and hearts. Fear and anxiety persist, and so does temptation - the temptation to make our own gods, from which to receive some strange reassurance that every thing is going to be all right. Most of us do not like to be left on our own, especially in a wilderness, especially in a time of doubt and fear. We want something to fill the void, assuage our anxiety, and see us through difficult times. Yes, most of us are hungry. We are hungry for comfort and reassurance; we are hungry for guidance and protection; we are hungry for something that will give meaning to our choices and circumstances.

Yet, our lesson reminds us that not all objects of our spiritual hunger are equal. Be aware of false gods! Be aware of misplaced trust! Be aware of disordered love! Be aware of spiritual junk food! Yes, pay attention to the food with which you feed your starving souls!

Our Gospel lesson is another reminder. The door to the wedding banquet, the door to God's kingdom, is wide open. All are welcome. All are invited. However, God's kingdom cannot be converted to conform to our own needs, desires, and expectations. God's kingdom is not something which can be bent and shaped into whatever we want it to become. The metaphor Jesus uses in the story is a garment, a wedding robe, but I don't think that this is simply a story about proper attire. If so, I would be the first one in trouble. You know that I am quite capable of showing up at a banquet in my beloved jeans! This story is about the seriousness of Jesus' invitation. No, God's Kingdom, as preached by Jesus, is not an experience of "anything goes." No, my friends, God's Kingdom is not about anything that will give us comfort and reassurance, anything that will give us pleasure and enjoyment, anything that will make us feel good, anything that will fill our empty and aching stomachs. Be aware of spiritual junk food! Be aware of false gods!

How many of you are hungry and restless? How many of you feel content and satisfied? Wherever we find ourselves on the journey of faith, we have an invitation today – an invitation to re-examine the desires of our hearts and the practices of our lives. What gives our lives a larger meaning and purpose? Where do we put our trust? Where do we find comfort and joy, strength and energy, courage and zest? Where do we find food for our souls?

Paul writes beautifully in our Epistle lesson today: *"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."*

May we fill our empty souls with these things that are true, honorable, just, and pure, and never settle for less! May we join ourselves to Christ, our beautiful Savior, and never settle for less! May we feast on his Word, the Bread of Life, or may we stay hungry! May we never settle for less, never for false gods! Let the faithful congregation say, AMEN!