

A few years ago I was teaching a course on faith and justice with high school students, and we were discussing poverty in America. In a moment of spirited conversation, I said to the class, “Can you imagine all the crap a family in poverty has to go through just to get their children quality education?”

After the class session, a young man came up to me with some feedback. He said that he was uncomfortable with me - a pastor - cursing, and he told me that he would like me to please stop doing so in his presence.

Afterwards as I processed this request, I didn't feel ashamed of what I had said. I actually felt perplexed. What did it mean that this seventeen year old was more focused on the language I used than the fact that I was conveying: that 11 million American children live in poverty? What kind of Christianity taught him that the use of the word “crap” was the most important part of this conversation about the profound suffering of his community? Who had told him that God cares so much about that?

This interaction with my student stuck out to me because it is an anecdote that so clearly illustrates the theologies of a majority of American teens. In a sweeping sociological study a few years ago, scholar Christian Smith interviewed American teenagers about their faith and spirituality. These teens were from a variety of religious communities both inside and outside the Christian tradition. Smith's findings were alarming. The research included word searches to study which phrases were used most and least when teens described their faiths. The top phrase used, by far, was "being a sinner, or personally sinning against God," with 47 youth focusing on this concept. Conversely, at the bottom of the list were the concepts of "loving one's neighbor" with 3 mentions, and then "working for social justice," which was mentioned by zero students when talking about their faith. In sum, almost every teen interviewed saw faith individualistically, while none made mention of faith as a social or communal practice related to social justice.

These teens are not on their own in this way of thinking. It's likely that they internalized an anemic faith from their churches. A majority of evangelical

communities - as well as some mainline protestant churches - preach a faith focused solely on the individual - individual sin, individual salvation, individual relationship with God, etc. To justify this myopic focus on the self, many American Christians have been taught to give outsized importance to Genesis chapters 1-3, emphasizing how Adam and Eve's individual choices and sin grieved God, who ejected them from the Garden. While there is of course value to this creation myth, it is essential for us to recognize that Genesis 1-3 was not the foundational text for the Israelite community. The foundational text for Israel - for her self-understanding and understanding of God - was Exodus.

The Exodus story was pivotal for Israel. It is in this book that God reveals God's self as the one who hears the cries of the oppressed. It is the book where God acts to liberate the Hebrew people. And it is this book when God gives the law to this liberated group of former slaves, to show them a new, equitable way to be in community.

So one could rightly say that the most important creation story for Israel as a COMMUNITY was actually the Exodus: God created this community, drawing them out of the evil empire of Egypt, and giving them the Law to guide them. If this is all accurate, then perhaps the first “sin” of Israel as a COMMUNITY is our passage today - the worship of the golden calf.

As we reflect on this passage, we must remember that the question of which God Israel will worship is significant. We should not imagine this as an instance of primitive people groups picking a side in a wrestling match between two arbitrary deities. Rather, this passage is a conversation about the ethics of Israel’s life together, because what you worship is what you become. We know that this crisis of idolatry is really about ethics by looking back at what has happened in the immediately preceding chapters of Exodus. In previous chapters God has given the Law of Moses, showing Israel what it looks like practically to worship Yahweh.

To worship Yahweh means to practice financial forgiveness of debts every seven years, so no ruling class will rise up to oppress others.

To worship Yahweh means that instead of harvesting all your crops, you should leave the food that falls on the ground so that hungry people won't starve.

The Law gives Israel a blueprint for how to be a community where there will be, and I quote "No poor among you." Or in the words of Walter Bruegemann, God calls them to be a community of "radical neighborliness."

In this context, we can understand why God is so grieved that the people have begun worshipping another God. When they build and worship the golden calf, they are saying "We will not worship the God of justice and neighborliness." God's anger is because God longs for Israel to be a community where there are no poor among them. And this cannot be accomplished if Israel strays from their covenant with God.

If we take this story seriously, it leads to some challenging applications for today's church. To be clear, I am not arguing against personal devotion - in fact personal prayer and spiritual practice are an essential part of our growth as Christians. But Exodus challenges us to realize that mature believers must dare to let their personal practice overflow into public action for justice.

So it's no wonder that many American Christians would rather focus on their personal relationship with God. Because if we instead listen to God's commands in Exodus, we would have to reckon with the fact that God cares most about the application of our faith to issues of power, wealth, and politics in community.

If my faith is just about my personal salvation, then I can say my prayers and then turn around and ignore Black Lives Matter protestors, without feeling guilty. If it's only about my personal salvation, I can go to church faithfully but then vote for people who will enact homophobic policies or incite racism or fear of immigrants.

Put quite simply, if faith is only about my personal conduct, then I can excuse myself from any responsibility I have for acting to change my society into the one God's envisions in the Law of Moses. If faith is only personal, then I can worry more about whether my pastor cusses than how I benefit from an economic system where 11 million children live in poverty.

But if we take the golden calf story seriously, we must acknowledge that God commanded Israel to be a vessel for the transformation of society into a place of radical neighborliness. We must acknowledge that God cares about where we choose to live, and who we vote for, and whether we protest or stay silent in the face of injustice.

The unavoidable conclusion for us from the Exodus is that faith must be a public practice, where our personal faith overflows into public action. And that action must reflect the priorities of God - justice and hospitality. Otherwise we are just worshipping the Gods of fear and greed.

I don't need to tell you that we are in a scary time. Especially as we socially distance, it can be easy to simply turn inward. To retreat into privatized faith. But God is calling us to reclaim faith as a public practice. How might you live out your faith publicly this week?

- As our older community members struggle with isolation

- As our young families struggle to juggle work and school and childcare

- As we near a precarious and historic election

- As teeter on the razor's edge of climate disaster

- As we sit in the ashes of the death of George Floyd

How might you live out your faith in the public sphere?

The God of the Exodus invites us to turn from the idolatry of an isolated, self-centered faith, and to live for the community where there are no poor among us. How will we respond?