

can always reorient our lives to serve God above all. First, we can remain open to change and to other ways of being, just like God did in listening to Moses. We can make our position on some issues more exploratory and less final. We can keep our hearts open to how the Spirit might be moving. Second, we can choose to turn a different way and then actually do it. We can point our lives in a new direction. We can notice what's not right, not working, and we can live differently because of it.

For the past 10 days, it's been hard to look away from pictures of the devastation from Hurricane Helene in the southeast. The damage from extreme rain in the mountains, so far from the coast, is especially hard to fathom. No one wishes that experience on anyone. But out of that trauma, I keep seeing people remark on the impact it is having on their community; on how, collectively, folks are acting. This tragedy seems to have put into sharp focus who we are called to serve; what matters most. In some way, for a time at least, it has shattered the idols we all participate in and put the focus on what is most important. One person, Teana Weems, wrote a Facebook post that's making the rounds titled, "A Few Lessons I've Learned in a Mountain Hurricane." Her thoughts sum up nicely what it might look like to serve God first and to honor the spark of God which is present in each person God created. As she and her neighbors cleanup from the storm, she has found these things to be true:

- "No one is talking about politics
- [The] Most used phrase [is]: "How can I help?"
- No one cares that AL beat GA
- Everyone wants to do something
- People are generous
- Water is a precious commodity
- A sleeping bag and a hot meal is priceless
- God isn't dead in the midst of a tragedy
- Dragging a tree out of a stranger's yard may make him cry
- You don't need a t-shirt advertising your church to be used by God
- The sweetest fellowship is often found in the nastiest places
- Jesus lives in the midst of our brokenness."

May those truths, borne of hardship, shatter any idols we participate in. May they lead us to serve God and neighbor above all else, both in good times and in bad.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God.

1 <https://tinyurl.com/5n7pjfb>

2 Becky Sullivan, "A Third of former NFL players surveyed believe they have CTE, survey finds," NPR, September 23, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/ykydrmbz>

3 Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus: Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 284.

4 Fretheim, 287.

October 6, 2024
World Communion Sunday
"To Serve God First"
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Exodus 32:1-14

A few years ago, a major college admissions scandal blew through the U.S. The investigation, deemed Operation Varsity Blues, revealed that more than 50 wealthy parents had paid huge amounts of money for their kids to cheat on college entrance exams like the SAT and ACT. Other parents bribed college coaches and administrators so their teenagers would be admitted as sports recruits to elite universities. In the end, some familiar names were convicted, including movie actress Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin, of TV *Full House* fame.

I bet most of us were disgusted by this news. This was an ugly picture of how wealth, when used improperly, can grease wheels and corrupt people's ethics. But those parents also did not send their bribes in a vacuum. All of us live in a world where the narrative says that going to a fancy college, or even just a "good" college, is the most important thing in a young person's life; that that goal should be met at any cost. There are ways all of us participate in the perception that this decision is make or break for the rest of your life. And pressure like that on young people and parents sometimes means we begin to value this one decision more than anything else. Well before any bribes are offered, average people also suffer the consequences of this pressure and the kinds of decisions it forces us to make with time, energy, and money. Before we know it, we begin to serve this particular notion of success above all. It has moved into the rightful place of God.

In Exodus, the people had just said 'yes' to living in God's beloved community. Then they watched Moses go back up the mountain to encounter the presence of God again. Well, the honeymoon period of this new covenant with God did not last very long. The people weren't necessarily arguing, but they were impatient. Moses was taking a long time to come back. I love how the Common English Bible translates it. The people said, "As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't have a clue what has happened to him." For the Hebrew people, they

didn't know where their leader was. Which made them feel that maybe God wasn't there either. So they wanted an easy substitute. They were looking for a leader and a god who they could see right in front of them. And the guy who'd been left in charge, Aaron, seemed happy to oblige.

Like it happened in the college admission scandal, the Hebrews turned to their wealth first of all. When they had escaped Egypt, for better or worse, they plundered the people who had enslaved them—taking gold and silver and jewelry. All this they now gathered together, melted it down, and made it into a statue of a golden bull calf. History tells us now that this was a common image of deity throughout the near east at the time. So it's not surprising that the Hebrews turned to it to represent holiness. Right away, they started serving this statue instead of God. They bowed down to the statue, they brought it offerings, they gave it credit for freeing them from slavery. They made something besides God and God's teachings, the most important thing in their lives. God could hardly believe it! Immediately, God stopped addressing the Hebrews as "my people" and instead said to Moses, "your people...are ruining everything!"

In some ways, we are a long way from the golden calf episode. Christians today rarely try to make a physical image or statue to replace or represent God. We're comfortable with images of Jesus, of course, because he was human, though we have to be careful with these, too, so that we don't just make Jesus only in our own image. Those who follow Christ, generally are not tempted to make physical idols like the golden calf. But that does not let us off the hook. This is still a very relatable story. We routinely serve other gods. We give our lives to things that are not God. We often put something else in the rightful place of God. And the consequences can be disastrous.

Now, I am not really talking about just sleeping in, or going to Starbucks instead of church, on Sunday mornings. Though, if that motivates you to come church, please don't let me stand in your way! But the things we start to value above God, I think, are much bigger, and much more complicated. Like with the Hebrews, these things are often part of a communal experience, not just individual. The people then all got together, listened to Aaron, and then the shaping of the idol was well on its way. Everyone just caught up in what was happening, without even realizing it. We get swept up in what happens around us, too, and it is hard to find our way back to serving God above all.

Our culture's trust in a good college being our salvation is one way this happens. I think it happens in our lust for sports, too. Especially, that other weekend religion, football. In 2023, the NFL netted \$13 billion dollars—billion with a 'b'—which was up eight percent from the year before.¹ But our collective love for the game comes with a cost that we are just starting to

learn more about. Last week the *Journal of the American Medical Association Neurology* reported that one-third of 2,000 former NFL players surveyed believe they are living with chronic traumatic encephalopathy or CTE.² That's the degenerative brain condition believed to be caused by multiple concussions. Its symptoms include depression, cognitive impairment and suicidal thoughts. It's true that none of them know for sure if they have the condition, but that's because it can only be confirmed with a brain autopsy, after a person has died. Are we, the collective sports fans, putting our love of the game higher than our love for the players' health and safety? Do we serve our appetite for sports more than we honor the image of God in every person, and player?

The Hebrews, too, were bound up in something that was complicated and quickly spinning out of their control as they revered the calf above God. God's immediate response was justifiable anger. God was ready to call the covenant with these people off altogether, and to start over by making a great nation of Moses and his descendants instead of Abraham and Sarah's. But one commentary calls this initial reaction from God "exploratory," rather than a final decision.³ Because God was still open to other outcomes. So God's heart was open when Moses said, "Hold on a minute. These are your people whom you love." Moses offered rational reasons why God should keep the covenant and keep loving people into the right path. It would look bad if God had freed the people from slavery only to destroy them right away. It would violate God's own promise-making character if God broke the promises made to the ancestors.

And so the great surprise in the passage comes at the end: God's mind was changed. Our theology often teaches that God is perfect or unchanging. So it might be startling to learn that God had one thought, and then changed it. Some Bible translations even put this a different way. They say, God *repented* of what God had planned to do to the people. Repentance is "the reversal of a direction taken or a decision made." To repent is to stop and turn a different way. After listening to Moses, God turned a different way and decided to preserve the people. They were still accountable for their actions, but God kept the covenant with them. As Terence Fretheim says, this demonstrates that God does and will change in some ways. The things about God that never change are God's steadfast love and God's faithfulness to God's promises."⁴

We experience that unchanging commitment to love when we are reminded of our forgiveness in Jesus Christ. We know that we are freed from sin and death to love and serve. And yet, that doesn't mean we live perfect lives. We still go astray. We still choose other things, other idols, as more important than God. But if we follow God's lead in this story, then we