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Exodus 32:1-14  
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### **Not Without Them**

See if you recognize the following story.

Slammed doors, fear, angry yelling, confusion, frustration. That's how their relationship began.

And just so you know, it is not about DeLynn and me!

And then she found herself in a desperate situation, surrounded by hungry, growling wolves, certain to be killed by their sharp teeth.

Then he came. Saving her from certain death, risking his own life, chasing the fierce canines away.

But now, these two, the rescuee and the rescuer, had to live together. Now they had to learn how to get along.

Now they had to understand each other's idiosyncrasies, flaws, weaknesses, their ugly qualities and their inner beauty.

There had to be a mutual understanding, a common set of rules to follow. The two would have to get along, or there would be no peace and life would be miserable.

Anyone know what story I'm talking about?

If you think I'm talking about the Disney classic, *Beauty and The Beast*, well ... you would be right.

I share this story as a way of looking at the relationship between Israel and God.

God had saved the Israelites from years of brutal slavery in Egypt.

God parted the sea and drowned the approaching wolves (better known as the Egyptian army).

God then led the Israelites with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Now, the Israelites and God find themselves in the desert, a great expanse of wilderness.

God has provided water for them and bread from heaven (“manna”), but like Belle and The Beast in *Beauty and The Beast*, the two needed to learn how to live together.

So – like The Beast does in the movie – God invites the Hebrew people to dinner.

Well, it’s not really a dinner, it’s a meeting, a very special meeting.

Not as romantic as the ballroom dance scene in *Beauty and The Beast*, but it is an encounter that the Israelite people will not soon forget.

God tells the people to wash their clothes and comb their hair and get ready for God was coming down off the mountain to meet with them.

But, he also warns them not to touch the mountain. The mountain is “set apart” as holy.

Which brings us to today’s text, a famous Bible story that has a powerful message that has the potential to change our lives, our relationships with others, and our work as a church - if we can get beyond

the obvious.

How's that for setting the bar high! Ok, maybe a bit over the top...

We all know the story of the *golden calf*. If you didn't, you should – I just read it to you. I mean come on – pay attention!

The Hebrew word used for calf is *'egel* which is a *male calf*, so it would be fair to say that today's sermon is about a lot of bull!

Ha! Ha! Ha!

And that's just the problem. We know about the bull - how Moses has been up on the mountain for some time, and the people are convinced he's never coming back.

And how the people convince Aaron - Moses' brother - to make them a god they can hang on to.

And that Aaron calls for the people to bring their jewelry, and he melts it down, and he fashions a golden calf.

If we had read further in chapter 32, we would have found out that Moses comes down from the mountain with the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments from God, sees the people having a great big worship service, actually, more like a raucous party, celebrating this new god – and in response, breaks the tablets.

Then he takes the golden calf burns it and grinds it down to powder and scatters it on the water and makes the Israelites drink it.

And it only gets worse from there.

In sermons and in Sunday School, most of us have focused on the golden calf and the faithless, wicked people who worship it.

We've been warned that we must make choices ourselves about whether *we* will follow the one true God, or the false gods all around.

And as a matter of fact, initially that was what I was going to preach on this morning.

Trouble is, as I dug deeper, I discovered that the story is not really only about that. It may *seem* to be about this little golden bull that Aaron makes and the people worship.

But the bull is only a bit player in a much bigger story.

You see, the terrible thing in this story is not what's going on down in the camp. Oh no, the terrible thing in this story is what's going on up on the mountain!

Because, way up there, in the lofty heights where Moses is meeting with God, three incredibly provocative things take place.

First of all, *God calls it quits*. He's had it with the Hebrews. No matter how faithful he is to them, they are *faithless* in return.

They are a bunch of rebellious, stubborn, selfish, sin-loving people, and God has "*had it up to here*" with them!

In fact, you know how ticked off God is when he looks at Moses and says, "*Go down at once! YOUR people, whom YOU brought up out of the land of*

*Egypt have acted perversely..."*

You know how that is... when sometimes you come home at the end of a day and there is your wife or husband standing in the doorway, waiting for you, hands on their hips.

And before you can get a word out of your mouth, they say, *"Wait until I tell you what YOUR son did today..!"*

Trust me, I've heard it, you've heard it, we've all heard it at one time or other, right?

And God is so mad, he can hardly spit! (actually, I'm not sure if God can spit, but if he can, he probably would!)

God won't even admit he's related to these people.

And so God makes a decision. Three strikes and you're out.

He's been patient long enough. He's going to destroy the rebellious Israelites.

And so he says to Moses:

"I'll save YOU and keep my promises about making you a great nation. But not them. They are sinners to the core, and as far as I'm concerned, they're history."

See - the terrible thing is not with the golden calf down in the camp, but up on the mountain where God has called it quits!

God is going to save Moses, but he's going to blow the idol worshipers off the face of the planet.

And then - high atop the mountain - a second amazing thing

happens. Moses, in maybe one of the most dramatic moments in the Bible, speaks to God.

"Don't do it," he pleads. And then Moses reminds God that the sacred covenant God established is not just with *him* as an individual, but with *all* the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He points out to God that Egypt and the rest of the world will laugh at God if, after promising to save his people, he ends up wiping them out.

Moses argues that it is not enough for God to save only *one individual*. Salvation, as God promised it to Abraham, cannot be for *one*. It must be for *ALL!*

Do you see the incredible stand Moses takes?

Why, he actually refuses God's offer to save him - God's offer to fulfil the promise to him only.

In effect, Moses is saying, "*I'm not going anywhere... without THEM!*"

And now the story reveals a third amazing fact. God changes his mind!

Now, whether or not God *really* changed his mind, or God was all along leading Moses in a kind of rabbinical process of learning, I'll leave to smarter theologians than I.

What's more important is the central message.

You see, we live in a day when its tempting to divide the world into us and them - the righteous and the unrighteous.

It's not hard to look around and see people walking far away from

God, worshipping golden calves of every description.

As a matter of fact, ALL of us have our own "golden calves" to some degree.

And isn't it equally as tempting for us to want God to blow it all up. To execute God's judgment on that person who hurt us.

On that group that lives differently. On that person who's committed a crime. On the nation that has practiced genocide.

On that "other" political party that has "ruined" America. On the people who make movies and music that celebrate violence.

On all those who seem to be living far apart from God and care nothing for God's ways.

It's tempting for us to want God to save *us* and to give us the kingdom, but to *quit on them*.

But this morning, I want to tell you that question was settled a long, long time ago on a high mountaintop somewhere in the Sinai desert.

God considered calling it quits on the faithless, those who go after golden calves. *But God decided not to do it!*

Instead, that day God gave birth to a new kind of person of faith.

For in that moment, Moses became the first example of how God's people are called to live in the midst of a world that worships the golden calf.

You see, God's people are people who live with the attitude, "NOT WITHOUT THEM!!!"

I know a place in Berkeley that caters to runaways.

This is a fantastic facility that does not judge these young people but gives them a roof over their head, food to eat, and a way to break out of their dismal situation.

And it works because of the many volunteers who give up their time to reach out to these outcasts.

I hold these people up to you today as examples of how God wants his people to live.

For in a day of throwaway kids - when it's tempting to think of some as good apples to be preserved and others as bad apples to be discarded. These faithful folks are embracing this population of at-risk young people and saying, "NOT WITHOUT THEM!"

Or right in our own backyard there are a group of people (like DeLynn) involved in a program called Kairos - where they go out into the prisons and work with inmates society has long since tried to forget.

But these committed Christians reply: "NOT WITHOUT THEM!"

And then there's Mother Teresa who lived among the poor of Calcutta.

Is it enough for God to save only saintly nuns while the poor are left to languish? Like Moses, Mother Teresa's life loudly declared, "NOT WITHOUT THE POOR!"

That's why Sister Helen Prejean advocated for the life of Matthew Poncelet and others on Louisiana's death row.



Her book was called "Dead Man Walking," but her message was the same as what Moses said about those people in the camp who were condemned to die: "NOT WITHOUT THEM!"

And here we are. People loved by God. And yet, we are people who live in a world where we regularly practice giving up on people.

Some of those given-up-on people are in our own families.

Some of those given-up-on people are our enemies upon whom we would love God to execute judgment and vengeance.

Some of those given-up-on people are persons who practice different lifestyles, persons addicted to drugs, persons caught up in destructive behaviors, persons whose lives have inflicted terrible injury upon others.

Some of those given-up-on people are persons whose lives have been so infected by poverty, injustice, abuse and hopelessness that it seems they will never become well.

And we can go ahead and join the rest of the world in quitting on these people.

Or we can take to heart the heroic words whispered long ago on a high mountaintop in the Sinai desert. "Don't do it, God! Don't give up on them!"

This morning I hope that we too can believe in a salvation larger than ourselves.

And I hope we'll make a commitment to connect ourselves in love to those the world has given up on.

For if we are to be a people dedicated to serving the needs of God, we must become a church whose living message is the very message of Jesus from the cross:

"FATHER, NOT WITHOUT THEM!!!"

*Amen*