

October 9, 2011

Exodus 32:1-14

I remember once when a friend of mine came to tell me that his marriage had ended and he and his wife were now in the process of getting a divorce. I was so sad. We had all been close and I had to ask: "What happened?"

I'll never forget the kinds of things he talked about in answering my question. He described how he and his wife often argued- but that arguing was always a regular part of their relationship. He described how they also had many good times together and how even their heated discussions and arguments seemed an important part of working things out, finding their way and coming to know and understand each other better. But then he said that something changed and eventually-- "it seemed like all we were doing... was arguing."

I thought that was interesting. It wasn't the arguing that was their problem, it was that eventually *all they were doing* was arguing.

It's not just in a marriage or a friendship (or a church group) where arguing may at times be a part of what's going on. And maybe it's because of my German-Irish..... English-Scottish-Norwegian-Italian-Swedish-Hungarian roots-- but I have always believed that arguing was just kind of a natural part of family life.

Is it ever OK to argue? Is it ever more than just OK? Is it ever necessary in a relationship to really get into something and work it out... even if it feels like arguing?

I think it sometimes it is OK... and sometimes... it's even more than *just* OK.

That's why, as a special treat to the first 150 attendees at today's church service, I have included for your practices of arguing, the (not entirely original) "8 Rules for having a Good Argument"¹. People say that they'd go to church if there was something practical to take home with them to use in their every day lives... well... here it is.

[Go over the rules, and what they mean]

The reading from Exodus 32 is one of my all time favorite parts of the whole story of the Israelites after their deliverance from captivity in Egypt. But things have gone terribly wrong in their journey as a people of God.

- Moses was so long on the mountain where he was meeting with God about all the laws God was giving the people, that they gave up waiting and turned to idolatry... making a golden calf, and declaring that this life-less idol that they could see was God... thus turning from the un-seen, living God who they had experienced in real life.
- That is when the trouble begins... and that's when the arguing happens.
- God tells Moses (as today's reading described it) "Now don't try to stop me... I am

¹ This is a version of what was given to me years ago by a colleague who used them as a part of his Pre-Marital discussions: 1. One thing at a time 2. Doormats get worn out 3. Attack the problem... not each other 4. Allow for a little breathing space 5. Change the setting 6. No cold shoulder stuff... but it's OK to take a break 7. Trading stamps are not accepted 8. Never say "never"... always avoid saying "always"

- going to wipe these people out and start all over again.”
– But Moses argues with God.

I said: “Moses... argued... with God.” (Cue the eerie Organ music!)

I'm not sure what to say about this. It's an amazing scene. God sharing God's heart with Moses. He is fit to be tied... or untied. He is going to level the boom on these people. I don't want to give anything away here, but God has a broken heart over this. It's as though the love of his life has two-timed him, and mixed in with his hurt is his anger. He is absolutely infuriated at these 2-timing, idolatrous people!

But Moses argues with God. “Don't do anything rash.” I don't think Moses is the best arguer over the course of human history, because it is almost as if he starts saying just about anything that comes to him. But he says it from his heart:

“Lord... should you really be so angry with this people who you helped already in so many ways?”

“And besides... if you wipe them out, what will people say? We don't want people to be saying unkind things about you, do we?”

Moses may not have been the best arguer... but he did speak from his heart.

I don't know about the wisdom of arguing with God. And it hardly helps to find that many faith traditions include stories about people attempting to change the course of events that are only understood as being in the hands of God (a form of arguing with God). I don't know if it's the kind of thing we should recommend to each other as a regular part of our lives of faith. But I do know this. Moses must have trusted God so much that he felt that he could just throw out all the stops and lay it on the line. He spoke to God from his heart and he didn't worry about how much the things that he said made sense. He didn't worry about how God would react to him as he argued the way he did. Moses trusted God enough to be fully open with himself before God. And God... was OK with that.

And not only that, here's what happened, as it was described in our reading:

“So the Lord changed his mind and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.”

Now, we might not know what to do with that part of the story. Moses argues God out of doing what God said he was going to do. (God said: “Now don't try to stop me... I'm going to wipe them out.”) But Moses argued anyway. And God... changed his mind.

We might not know what to do with what a story like this reveals about God. But there it is. And I think it's a wonderful story.

And I think it's an important story, even an important revelation about the nature of God. Whether we feel that we know something and comprehend something... or are just left wondering more than we were before hearing the story. I think this is an important story for us as people of faith. As an aside, in case we are wondering, this isn't the only place in the Bible where God is described as changing God's mind. Read through the book of Jonah sometime when you have a chance. It happened there too.

Now, there's at least one thing more from this story that may be important for us to connect

with. And it has to do with the seriousness of the people's behavior, that resulted in God's heart being so broken as it was.

Maybe the best way to understand it all, is to recognize how easy it is to exchange the glory and goodness of God... the hopes and intentions of God on our behalf... for that which will always result in so much less.

That's what the people did.

They exchanged their relationships... their deep connection with the living God... for a made-made statuette, or a golden calf. And they behaved as though something lifeless was more alive than life itself... more alive than God.

When might we have exchanged the glory of God for something less that promised more?

- Monetary wealth promises that more will be better, but Jesus' message is that greatness in his kingdom happens through compassion and service.
- Fame and fortune is the world's promise of what makes for success, but how often does that kind of idolatry result in a sense of spiritual emptiness and separation from God and others in our lives? (any Entertainment section of the Sunday paper gives a hint about how often)
- The lure of instant gratification whether in the form of junk food, ones possessions, or sex, promises to make a person feel better, but ends up making a person settle for so much less than healthy bodies, minds and relationships.
- Holding onto a long-time grudge can seem like having more (protecting ones heart more, keeping more safe), when being closed to forgiving others actually makes one less open to receiving the reassuring forgiveness of God and the peace of heart, mind and soul that is God's greatest glory. No wonder Jesus taught about such a thing in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said: "If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done..."

Sometimes the very thing that seems like more from this world's perspective, results in so much less than it promises... at least when compared to the greater glory of God.

I have noticed that ones experience with the Glory of God, rarely comes in an instant. Sometimes what is required is on-going practice or effort to work through what's going on in life. To come to understanding something new. Or something not new, but understanding something in a new way.

We're talking about growing in faith and trust with God. Usually it involves learning.. often from the perspectives of others. So listening is involved. And self discipline. Plus self care, even while also having regard for another.

Could it be?

Am I describing a "good argument" as one of the ways we grow as people of faith in God?

Maybe sometimes our “working through things” includes a “good argument” with someone in our lives... or someone from whom we are broken of relationship. Maybe even sometimes, we are in need of a heart-to-heart with God about our feelings, our situations, our hurts, our deepest selves.

If God was willing to change his mind that day when he and Moses had such a heart-to-heart talk, maybe there's something now and then about which we too are invited to *change our minds*.

I believe that when we listen from the depths of our hearts, what we are likely to hear is the voice of God... calling... God's summons in our particular day; Just as prophets like Isaiah once heard God, we may also hear God... We may hear God seeking out who to send into the very places of the world that need the love, grace and forgiveness that can only come from us. Amen.

Our closing hymn continues the words I just shared...
“The Voice of God Is Calling” Red Hymnal, 436