

St. Mary's Episcopal Church

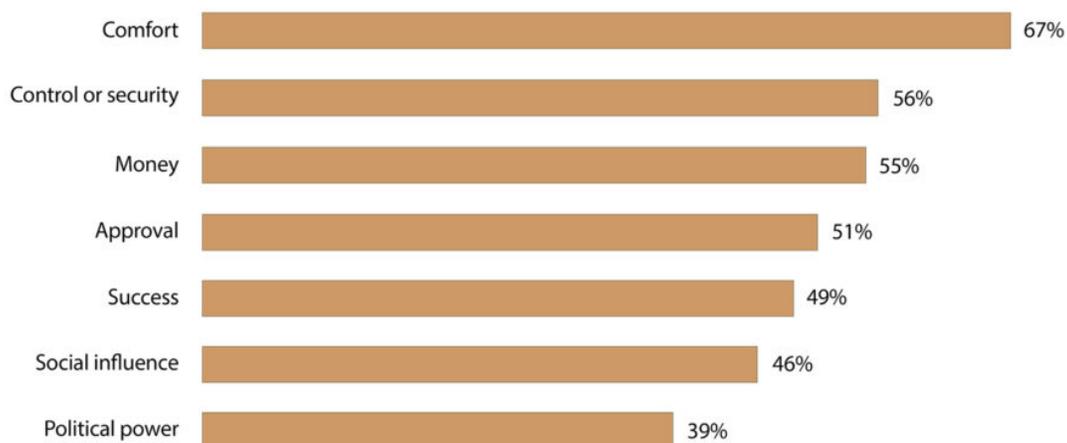
Message by The Rev. Michael Burke

Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 23; Matthew 22:1-14

October 15, 2023

## What modern-day idols have significant influence in U.S. churches?

*Among U.S. Protestant pastors*



*Notes: Respondents could select all that apply. 2% say not sure.*

Source: Lifeway Research phone survey of 1,000 U.S. Protestant pastors conducted Sept. 1-29, 2021

Good morning.

If you are just joining us this week, let's begin with the backstory of the Old Testament and Gospel passages we just heard:

in the Exodus saga, the Israelites have been delivered by the power of God from the bondage of slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh. Moses has led them through the red sea into the wilderness, where they have complained bitterly. Moses has now gone up the mountain to converse with God, but has been gone a while. Moses has been gone long enough, in fact, that the attention span of the people has been eclipsed by their impatience and frustration. So... they decide to take matters into their own hands and make for themselves an idol, something that can be 'god' for them. In this case, they melt down their precious metals to make a golden calf. Of course, God, the real "god," from up on the mountain, is neither impressed nor happy about this. And it is only the intervention of Moses that changes God mind and thus diverts disaster.

Now, if we turn to the Gospel for today.. well, it is harder than the Exodus saga, and rather problematic. The parable of the Wedding banquet is unique to the Gospel writer Matthew, so different is it in context and details to a somewhat similar story that Luke tells in his Gospel. Over the last 2000 years it has been read and interpreted in dozens of ways, all different. Its context is complicated. The story's telling by Matthew comes at a time shortly after the shocking destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by Roman armies in the year 70, when the whole center of Jewish life collapsed and the people were made to scatter. Matthew and his community were religious trauma survivors, living through a harsh and brutal time of domination and violent subjugation. Both Matthew's worldview and his language reflect that. Admittedly, the metaphors or analogies are difficult for us today.

But there is always meaning for our daily lives to be found in the sacred stories of Holy Scripture. Let's look at the stories together, this morning, and ask ourselves how these two texts intersect with the text of our own lives.

Let's begin with that story of the golden calf: A quick theological definition of an "idol" is anything that takes the place of God for us. We live in age of idols.

As I've been thinking of this, a few questions occur to me; Michael what are the idols in *your* life? What are the things that creep in, and take the place of God for you? The place in your life that rightfully belongs to God? Let me list some of the contenders...

**Work?** Now, work is a good thing. Work helps feed our families and provider us with shelter. Some people have no choice but to work two or even three jobs just to stay afloat. Work (or whatever form "busy-ness" takes for you) often gives us meaning and purpose in life. But honestly, when does work expand to the point that there is little time left for God? Little time left for sitting still and listening for that still small voice? When do the things we do for work, or activity, become our sole, or primary source of identity? When do we think of ourselves in terms of *what* we are, or *who* we are, instead of *whose* we are? At what point does our work begin to take the place of God in a competition for our time, attention, energy, and passion?

But I don't mean to pick on "work." Like I said, up to a certain point, "work" is a very good thing.

Then if work isn't our idol, what about the **social approval** of others? Am I more motivated by what others think I should do, then from my own best discernment (or shared prayerful discernment in community) of what God would have me do? Sometimes social approval, or my standing in the eyes of others, threatens to take the place of God in my life. They say "everyone's a Christian until following Jesus starts to have a price..." "God asks for justice..." honestly, sometimes I just want to be well thought of.

**Money/ stuff/possessions.** That's almost too easy. Everywhere around us, the culture tells us: "This car is you," ""This house is you..." "When we start to think measuring our worth by the clothes we wear, the size or zip code of the house we live in, or the car we drive... well... where then is the image of God, in which each of us are formed?

**Status?** Is that my idol? Is that the thing that sometimes takes the place of God for me? Some say that beyond a certain point, money doesn't even matter ( Some rich folks say that, by the way. I've never heard poor folk say that...) But money is how our culture "keeps score," isn't it? It is what separates or distinguishes the "successful" from the "losers."

Even this thinking of people in terms of "winners or losers..." "...people to be included; people to be excluded..." Ahhh.. Maybe here is where that problematic Gospel from Matthew comes in... For all its confusing complexity, in the parable of the Wedding Feast, the so-called "important invited guests" were all too busy to go to the wedding banquet. Those who were not hard-hearted and cruel were simply too busy – after all, they had farms and businesses they had to go to... In the parallel passage from Luke's Gospel, it was only those in the streets, - those whom Luke calls "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" who accept the invitation and come to the feast. In other words, the ones the world calls "the losers", those who know their true need for God, enter into the banquet that is meant for all... while the so-called "important people" miss the call...

**So... Who or what are the idols in your life?** I've just listed a few of mine, my friends.

**Where in your life do you hear God's invitation for fellowship and deep relationship with God?**

The kind the Psalmist today speaks of. That even though we shall walk through the shadow of the valley of death, we shall fear no evil, for God walks beside us.

You are already loved. In fact, you are loved by God more than you can ever possibly imagine...

**So what keeps you away? What is *in* your way?**

Here's an idea: Let's think and pray on these questions this week ahead.

And to make a right beginning, let's take three or four minutes right now just to be alone with our thoughts about these things... to just sit with these challenging questions this morning's Holy Scriptures bring us.

Here are the questions again:

- **Who or what are the idols in your life?**
- **Where in your life do you hear God's invitation for fellowship and deep relationship?**
- **What stands in your way?**

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## Exodus 32:1-14

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

## Psalm 23

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; \*  
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures \*  
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul \*  
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil; \*  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; \*  
you have anointed my head with oil,  
and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, \*  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

## The Gospel - Matthew 22:1-14 - The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

Once more Jesus spoke to the people in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

["But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."]

## Alternative Gospel Passage to Consider

### Luke 14:10-27

<sup>10</sup>But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. <sup>11</sup>For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

<sup>12</sup> He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. <sup>13</sup>But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. <sup>14</sup>And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

### The Parable of the Great Dinner

<sup>15</sup> One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' <sup>16</sup>Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. <sup>17</sup>At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." <sup>18</sup>But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." <sup>19</sup>Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." <sup>20</sup>Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." <sup>21</sup>So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." <sup>22</sup>And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." <sup>23</sup>Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. <sup>24</sup>For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'" '

## Playlist:

### Welcome to Struggleville



All is quiet on the Western front,  
There appears to be a lull.  
John and Jane Doe are sleeping well tonight  
With the little thoughts inside their skulls.  
Salome she's undressed to the nines  
Although a few pounds fatter.  
She's got Pavlov's bells on her ankles and wrists,  
She coming at you with her platter.

I stole down to the waterfront  
To escape the desert heat.  
What on earth you gotta do around here  
To try and get yourself a drink?  
Heard John the Baptist preaching  
"Make way for the King,  
But if you wanna recognize him,  
you gotta tell me all your sins"

They are building a new gallows  
For when You show up on the street.  
Polishing the electric chair,  
They're gonna give You a front row seat.  
Heard a sneer outside the garden;  
Salutation so well-heeled:  
"Welcome all you suckers to Struggleville"

I've been trying to negotiate peace  
With my own existence.  
She's gotta stockpile full of weaponry;  
She breaking every cease-fire agreement.  
Whole thing is full of decay  
Just as sure as I'm made of dust,  
And into rust I know the Beast is falling.

They are building a new gallows  
For when You show up on the street.  
Polishing the electric chair,  
They're gonna give You a front row seat.  
Heard a sneer outside the garden;  
Salutation so well-heeled:  
"Final Stop! No points beyond Struggleville"

Songwriters: Bill Mallonee

Welcome to Struggleville lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group