

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

22 Pentecost  
October 12, 2008  
Fr. Bill McGinty

**“Fishing for Love”**

On a warm summer Friday evening in August Benjamin and Esra stole out of their family homes in the small village in Galilee and set out across the fields. They were heading for the Canaanite town of Bethel, for no other reasons, than their Canaanite friends had told them Bethel was a ‘hot ‘ place to be any summer Friday night. As they climbed the hill towards the Canaanite town, they were joined by lots of young Canaanite adults.

As they entered the crowded town, they were met with the smell of food cooking, burning torches, the sound of pipes, drums and music. People were moving towards the large temple building. Red towels hung from house windows that they passed. The temple was packed; music beat out across its courtyard, the temple priestesses danced on the steps. They were adorned with silk, jewelry and a gold armband in the shape of a snake. The youth danced before a statue of a golden calf, the symbol of wealth and fertility.

There was much food to eat and wine to drink into the small hours of the morning. Benjamin and Esra joined in, forgetting their Jewish background and laws.

The next morning they slept late and had to scramble to make Synagogue on time. The opening prayers were already well under way. The Rabbi, Jacob looked up and noticed them. He motioned Benjamin to read the scripture passage. Benjamin started to read from Genesis, but the Rabbi’s cane came down on his hand. “No” he said, “read here.” He turned the great scroll to Exodus, Chapter 32 and Benjamin began to read about the “Golden Calf” that almost destroyed Israel two hundred years ago. As he read and the story of the Golden Calf began to unravel, Benjamin’s face got redder and redder. He thought he must have looked as if he was burning up. Esra thought his friends face was burning up, especially when he read: “He took the gold from them, formed it into a mold, and cast an image of a calf.” By Benjamin’s side the Rabbi gently tapped his own hand with his cane.

He felt all eyes looking at him as he walked back to his place. As he took his seat, Esra nugged him in the ribs. For some unknown reason the two boys were sent south the next day to work on their uncles farm in Judea, for a whole year. The work was hard, the hours in the fields long, with only Saturday off to attend Synagogue. Every time they complained their uncle would laugh long and loud and say, but you boys are the great mountaineers who conquered the hill of Bethel and off he would go into the fields still laughing. His daughters would tease them and say: “Did you boys see any Golden Calves out there in the fields today?” or “Maybe a priestess who had lost her way,” the other would chime in.

“If I ever get home,” said Benjamin to Esra, “remind me to stay home on Friday nights.”

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The story of the Golden Calf was written to frighten the lives out of Hebrew boys and girls; much the same as we tell our kids 'the bogymen is going to get them.'

The story asks the rest of us a simple question: "What Golden Calf do we put in the place of our God?" In our modern age it would be anything; work, television, baseball, fashion, money, food, sport or even our time.

The Exodus story of Israel's betrayal begins with Aaron telling the people to take off the rings from wives, sons and daughters. They are the symbols of love and family unity; to be melted down for an image.

Too often we lose that which is most precious to us in our relationship with God, when we fail to fit him into our lives. Our time becomes too precious. Our prayer disappears in the rush, even Sunday is sacrificed when work raises its ugly head and bites into our week. This happens to all of us from construction worker, to nurse, from bank employee to priest.

The place I always feel closest to God is on a river in the early morning, fishing for trout, before most people are even out of bed.

I have not held a fishing pole in my hands now for 4 years, so how bad am I? You see, there is a lot of praying in trout fishing. The river always reminds you of the stages and journey of your life. Trees, flowers, butterflies, the sounds of birds, speak to you of creation all around you. Standing alone in water, you can't help but think about God. You remember things when you are fishing that have not come into your head in thirty years. Fishing unites the past and the present and it tells you that you only have a certain number of casts left, because like the river you too are journeying towards an end. The autumn is a great time to fish; the leaves have painted the landscape and the poetry of everything you see makes you pray. Your prayer has no words. No words are necessary. God, your God, has spoken and he has spoken to your heart.

Fishing and autumn tell you about love. They tell you about God's love. One day I went fishing to a place in Donegal called the Poison Glenn. It was a wet cloudy morning where the clouds hang low around the mountains. I went with a cousin Paddy Mackay. We fished all morning under a steady rain. Even then the lake and the hills were beautiful. Looking in any direction there was not a house, or a wall or a sign that man had been there in ten thousand years. Fishing alone I thought of people I had known, those who had died, and it was as if we were somehow united in that quiet isolated place. Time seemed to stand still and God seemed to be saying "Here I am." I had tried several times to light my pipe, but unsuccessfully in the rain. Every time I would attempt it, a fish would bite and I'd be too busy. It was as if God was saying: "Forget the pipe." There is something more important here. 28 fish later we packed up to go home.

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Years later my seniors in High School would ask me: “What is God like?”

I would tell them: “Well, he’s really irritating. Every time you want some peace and quiet to do the wrong thing he gets in the way. He makes a noise. He takes your breath away with something awesome or beautiful. He’ll make things happen and pretend that it’s a coincidence just to keep you guessing and make you wonder. He’ll build you up and then step back and laugh when you trip over your own stupidity and end up on your butt.”

But just when you want to give up on him, he will love you with a love so intense, that you no longer care that the river is ebbing slowly to the sea. You are just happy to be surrounded in that love.

And he will make you regret that you climbed the hill to Bethel once too often, or that you noticed that the Temple priestesses gold armband was in the form of a snake.

God, our God is a jealous God. He wants our time. He wants those, one on one moments. He is like an organist with a brand new pipe organ and a choir of voices. He wants us to pay attention as he plays the best tunes and arias of our lives. He wants us to know he is there, and that his name is love. Love in the early morning, love at the noon of our day, and when we rest, that he will be there with us as love ends our days. Let us not steal the day from our God. Let us give him the time he is due. Let us not build a golden calf by putting something less in the place of God, the master magician of our lives. Let us take a time out to play with our God, let us match him love for love, moment for moment. Let us allow ourselves to be amazed by him. Let us give ourselves time to be awe struck. Let us walk down into the waters of God’s love and fish for God’s love till the sun goes down. So that when someone asks: “What did you do?” You can say: “Oh I went fishing. I went fishing for God and caught love.”

Amen+

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