

I originally planned for this to be the last Sunday in our series on the Exodus but we are going to spend one more week on this Old Testament event next week. That's because the reading today is not the end of the story and as I looked at the remaining chapters I realized that we should not leave them off.

We have been reading over the past several weeks the story of God delivering God's people from slavery. We read of how God led the Israelites from slavery under pharaoh and led them through the wilderness desert. We read of how God provided the food and water they needed and delivered rules or commandments for them to live by. Last week we read the story of what happened when Moses was away for 40 days receiving instructions from God. When Moses returned, he found that the Israelite people had co-opted Aaron to help them build a golden calf that they could worship in place of an invisible God. Aaron asked for the people to bring him their gold and he would build for them an idol.

Little did we know at the time that when we heard that story of idolatry, a shocking story from Penn State University would rise up to the national scene. A story which could be placed right beside the Exodus story.

Many of us know the Penn State story by now. A graduate assistant football coach reported an alleged rape and abuse of a young boy by a former football coach who was revered on campus. The graduate assistant reported what he allegedly witnessed to longtime coach Joe Paterno. Paterno reported this to the athletic director who reported to the president. Police were never contacted by anyone within the Penn State hierarchy. As a result, more boys were allegedly abused and many more are coming forward. By latest count about 20 victims have been identified. This week the Penn State trustees have responded by firing their long time president, placing their athletic director on leave, and firing the winningest football coach of all time, Joe Paterno. Some students rioted in response.

As I have watched this story play itself out, I could not help but be drawn back to the Exodus story.

The Exodus story we read last week was all about people creating something that for them came to embody what they felt was important. They could not trust in the God they could not see so they created something magical in their eyes that they could see. But when Moses melted down the golden calf and the people realized that this calf was nothing magical, then and only then could they open themselves up to the God who was constantly creating new things that they could not imagine.

One could argue, I think, that Penn State football and Joe Paterno came to embody a modern day idol to many people. The institution became more important to some than the people who made up the institution. Preserving the institution became more important than protecting the victims of an abuser.

But we here cannot cast stones at the ones who deified Penn State football and overlooked the needs and victims around them. Because Penn State football up until last week embodied what was good. A clean program. Winning the right way. Honesty and integrity. But for many, protecting the institution became more important than the needs and victims that the institution served.

We must all ask that of whatever we create. Whether those things are athletic programs, schools, clubs, studios, and churches. When we make preservation of the institution more important than serving the needs around us, then we have created an idol which is a smaller version of Penn State football. When we become so focused on preserving our institutions that we do not see those who are victims and in desperate need around us then the institution has become an idol.

Read chapter 33:1-3

God says to Moses that they are to go to the land that God has promised them and will provide a way and an angel to guide them. But God also says to Moses that God is not quite sure that God can go with them. God says, if I go with you I might just kill you because you are so stubborn. Really? That's what God tells them?

Read 33:4-6

These ornaments that the people are wearing are the things that the people look to as signs of their success. These ornaments are what were used to create the golden calf idol in the previous scene and these ornaments are what they flash as signs of what they have accomplished.

So what are your ornaments? What are my ornaments? What are the things that I uphold and marvel over as signs that I have made it? I can tell you about some of the ornaments in my life. My house is one. My family owns a home. Well actually the bank owns our home. We pay them I guess. But I look to that home as a sign that I have made it. I am a home owner.

Same with a car. I like my little car. I like the way it makes me look. My home and my car are my ornaments. Signs of my success. One day I will hopefully complete my doctorate. Another little ornament that I can hold out as a sign of success. Academic achievement.

How about you? What is your ornament? What things do you look to as a sign of your success? What ornaments do you look to as proof that you have made it? What stuff or academic achievement or something else is a sign for you that you are worthy of acclaim?

Be careful. Because all of these ornaments can get in the way of what is really important. If our homes or cars or achievements or whatever we look to as signs of our success cause us to overlook the needs and victims around us, then we are losing sight of what is important.

Today you are receiving pledge cards. What a great day. You have the chance to pledge what you think you can donate to the church next year. But I want to share a moment of caution to any of us who will be filling out that pledge card. Kathryn and I will be. So will our 3 kids. As a family we all complete a pledge card to the church with our financial commitment to the church. For total transparency, the amount we pledged and am giving to ACPC this past year is -----.

I share that because if we are really faithful to what the Bible says then we would all be transparent about what we give.

But do not complete a pledge card this year because you want to maintain an institution. The institution being ACPC. Because if our goal is to maintain an institution then we are losing sight of the bigger picture. We could very easily become like what it appears that Penn State football became. A place that cared more about the institution than the purpose of why the institution existed.

Instead complete a pledge card as a commitment to do what this institution is called to do. We are called to feed those in our community who do not have enough to eat. We are called to provide an opportunity for anyone to come and worship God freely. We are called to provide opportunity for people to learn stories about who God is and what God is doing.

We are called to provide places to live for those who do not have quality places to live. We are called to teach people how to pray and depend upon God. We are called to provide a place where people come together in the community. We are called to reach beyond where we are comfortable and reach into the places that push us to see a bigger picture of what God is about.

We have been hearing stories this week about what happens when the institution becomes more important than the people that the institution is called to serve. Today I end with a story that is the opposite of that. And it also involves a football coach and team.

Some of you may have read about what happened in Myrtle Beach last Friday night. Myrtle Beach High is a football powerhouse. I saw them play in the state championship game last year when they beat our high school, Southpointe. Last Friday night, Myrtle Beach was playing their first playoff game and they were winning handily with but a few seconds left in the game against Hilton Head. Most coaches would have been focused on celebrating their win and moving on in the playoffs. But the Myrtle Beach coach, Mickey Wilson, called a timeout even though they were winning by 54 points. Hilton Head had the ball.

The Myrtle Beach coach pointed to the Hilton Head coach. The Hilton Head coach gave a thumbs up. The Hilton Head coach then sent in Chip Mullen. Chip Mullen was a senior playing in his last high school football game. Chip Mullen also has Down's syndrome. So on this last play of the game, the Hilton Head quarterback pitched it to Mullen. With some direction from a teammate, Mullen began heading up the field. He crossed midfield with the ball and ending up scoring a 75 yard touchdown. As he entered the end zone, the team from Myrtle Beach all surrounded them and congratulated him on his accomplishment.

As we hear stories of abuse, neglect, moral failure, and riots, we also need to be reminded that there are some folks out there who have not forgotten that the institution is not as important as the people and the needs and the victims that it is called to serve.

As we complete our pledge cards, I hope we all remember that important lesson as well. AMEN.

-Exodus 33

-Given: 11/13/11 in Allison Creek Pres (York, SC)