

Accessible Deities – Exodus 32:1-14

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When it's quiet and when you're by yourself, when your problems seem at bay, when everything is mostly ok with the family, and when work or tasks don't seem overwhelming, what do you think of? Where does your mind drift off to?

Football lovers this time of year probably drift to thinking about next weekend's games or their fantasy teams. Movie lovers peruse the newest releases at the theater or on streaming services. Hobbyists might muse over their golf swing, or the next quilt to sew, or the next novel to dive into, or the next picture to paint.

Or, in times of stillness, minds and hearts might instead focus on more ethereal matters that maybe satisfy our appetite for acquisition—some sort of “high” that might come from overindulging on a substance or a person or a behavior—a drink, a drug, a shopping spree.

In their own unique and degrees of potential harm, these things, people, or behaviors almost become deities. They obtain our allegiance because we think they can provide meaning we can't find anywhere else.

There's a new book out I'm eager to read. It's called *When Longing Becomes Your Lover*, by Amanda McCracken.

After she finished college, McCracken continued her elite running career and also became a journalist and teacher. In a review of the book in the *Christian Century*, the reviewer states that all three of those elements shaped the book, as did the impulse to look back over one's life and ask, “How did I end up this way?”

“For McCracken, ‘this way’ refers to her realization eight years ago that she was a 39-year-old virgin who had dated more than 100 men and seemed unable to find a love match. The question itself landed her in a therapist’s office, where she was offered a term for what ailed her: *limerence*, a term for the obsessive infatuation with an idealized other, a state that mimics love but runs on fantasy. Rather than being unlucky in love, McCracken had been faithful to the idea of longing itself.”

Longing became her deity. And that longing was aimed permanently at an idealized future man who was savored precisely because he never arrived in her life.

Making that kind of longing a deity can be true not only in a never-ending quest for the perfect person in your life, but also for the perfect career, the perfect income, and even the perfect level of happiness.

Longing or desire itself becomes the god. And that deity is very accessible to us. We can long for or desire anything at any time or in any place.

The people of Israel in this text from Exodus 32 have become blind to the blessings of God, a god they evidently deemed inaccessible. They are waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain—God’s messenger whom they also find inaccessible. And they turn on him and God.

“Their lack of trust in Moses, and therefore in God, [is astounding]. [Think of all the indicators of God’s presence and benevolence throughout the book of Exodus that both of them gave these people:] A burning bush, a walking stick that turns into a snake and then back into a stick again, ten plagues, release from captivity, the Red Sea parted and Pharaoh’s army destroyed, daily food and water provided in the wilderness, and all the

respect that Moses gets from the people is where they say in verse 1, 'we do not know what has become of him.' Tough crowd."

(Kathryn Z. Johnston, *Christian Century*, Sept. 23, 2020)

So, in this story, they plead with Moses' right-hand man, Aaron, to make for them a golden calf for them to worship. It's accessible: Out of all their gold rings, they convince him to build this idol to take God's place. Because, you know, it had simply been a while since Moses had reappeared. They were very impatient. They couldn't stand any longer delays.

So, the golden calf was built, and the people brought sacrifices and burnt offerings. And they had a good time, reveling in their new shiny object that had quickly become their new deity.

Maybe they, too, like us, were impatient or bored. Or maybe their memories like ours were short. Maybe they didn't remember God's liberation of them from a mighty Pharaoh in Egypt and the daily manna in the wilderness provided to them by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We forget and are impatient too. When we don't see that daily manna at our doorstep, at the hands of what we think is an inaccessible God, we go looking for a more accessible one.

One of the forgotten blessings of the God we often view as inaccessible is the gift to us of the two greatest commandments. Now, you ask, how can commands be a blessing? Well, these commandments are blessings to us because they help us find love within a community. They are the commands to love God and to love each other. And our memories, just like those of the Israelites, are short when it comes to remembering how much adhering to these commands keep us connected to each other

and, therefore, graced in love and moving forward together in a loving society.

It is so easy to forget these commands (these blessings, really) and, instead, attach ourselves to the more convenient and accessible deities that reflect the opposite of love for neighbor: words or actions that feel better at the time, like those used to denigrate a political leader or sports figure on social media or somebody who supports said political leader or sports figure.

Or, it's really easy to treat a neighbor with contempt for something he or she has done—an annoying word, action, or value demonstrated. Little things like this make us forget the blessing of loving our neighbors. When we do the opposite of loving, we break relationships or at least make them worse.

These kinds of behaviors all of sudden, and without us sometimes even noticing them, become our idols. They become our golden calves, our accessible deities. They are shiny and new and give us immediate satisfaction.

When the memories of our blessings are too short, we often give ourselves permission to do what the Israelites did—sidestep values and commitments we have sincerely and often publicly embraced.

That satisfaction from our idol-making, though: How long does it last? And doesn't it violate our commitment to loving God in response to God's great love for us?

At the end of this text, following Moses' recitation of all God had done for them and his plea, therefore, to show them mercy for the errors of their ways, God decides, despite God's anger, to relent from destroying them.

Like a loving parent who just can't let go of an ungrateful and disobedient child, God changes his mind.

Despite our idol-making, we can rely on the grace of God. Grace is the scandalous act of God moving toward and acting on behalf of us — the very ones who have violated our commitments and failed to keep our promises. Grace means that our salvation is not dependent on whether we avoid giving ourselves permission to sin, but on God's saving act on our behalf in Christ. It is the assurance that God has not moved away from us even though we have moved away from God.

As much as God had wanted to, God did not move away from the people of Israel, despite their short memories and subsequent worshiping of a more accessible deity.

Despite our impatience, our short memories, even the self-justifying of our sin sometimes, God is the grace-giver who overrides it all.

In the cartoon "Dennis the Menace," Dennis, as we know, is indeed a menace to his next-door neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, and yet Mrs. Wilson continues to be kind and gracious. In one cartoon, it shows Dennis and his little friend Joey leaving Mrs. Wilson's house, their hands full of cookies.

Joey says, "I wonder what we did to deserve this."

Dennis answers, and his answer is on target: "Look, Joey, Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we're nice, but because she's nice."

There's God and the Israelites written all over that lesson. And there's God and us written all over that story, too. Not because we're nice, but because God is nice.

The grace and mercy of God is not inaccessible. It's readily served every day.