

## **IDOLS FROM ANXIETY**

**Scripture Readings:** Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

**Texts:** Exodus 32:1-5; Philippians 4:2-7

Edwin H. Friedman died in 1996. He had been a student of Murray Bowen who had developed family systems theory but then Friedman went his own way focusing on how family systems could apply to congregations. Friedman's family posthumously published his book from his notes, A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix.

Friedman was concerned about what Bowen and he called societal emotional regression. What Friedman observed was that leadership at all levels in society accommodated the larger society rather than deal with the chronic anxiety of modern society by doing the hard work of adaptive change. This chronic anxiety is revealed in five ways<sup>1</sup>:

1. Reactivity: cycles of intense reaction by individuals to events and each other.
2. Herding: the need for togetherness trumps individuality and people will then adapt to the least mature members.
3. Blame displacement: an emotional state where people focus on what has victimized them rather than take responsibility for their own well-being.
4. Quick fix mentality: a low threshold for pain leads to a search for relief from the pain rather than explore adaptive change.
5. Lack of well-differentiated leadership: the fear leaders experience from the first four effects which only exacerbates those effects further.

Friedman noted that leadership experienced a failure of nerve in dealing with the chronic anxiety and its effects so that the anxiety only continues to grow. While Friedman may seem strangely prescient, I think his real genius is knowing history. These cycles of societal anxiety arise throughout history and only subside when someone comes along to help their society to see something new; they outline a vision and persist in following the vision even when the group attempts to sabotage the vision.

Friedman could point to the story we heard from Exodus as a perfect example of these effects. Moses has left the Hebrews in order to participate in a long conference with YHWH. Moses' absence left a leadership vacuum for the people and they grow

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, Failure of Nerve, New York: Seabury Books, 2007, pp.53-54.

anxious. They go to Aaron looking for relief from their anxiety; we get a sense that herding is taking place so Aaron attempts a quick fix to relieve anxiety. The golden calf becomes a new focus for the anxiety and the Hebrews subsume their anxiety with a festival. Walter Brueggemann believes that the calf is not so much an idol as it is a symbol for YHWH but as we know the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) prohibit its creation.

Other Hebrew Bible scholars suggest that the story might actually span centuries. Some suggest that the story reveals the later tension between the Levitical priesthood and those who hold to Mosaic tradition. Others wonder if the story reveals the derision the leadership in the Southern Kingdom felt for the Northern Kingdom; when Jeroboam had successfully revolted from the South, he lost contact with the Temple in Jerusalem. In response, Jeroboam established worship at Bethel and erected two golden bulls to represent the presence of YHWH. The golden “calf” could be a deliberate dig at the worship center in Bethel. As I said, anxiety is timeless.

The golden calf stands as an idol or another god that deflects the anxiety of the people from Aaron to the idol. Aaron escapes blame for the lack of leadership by focusing on the idol; therefore, if anyone questions the idol, then the group will scapegoat the questioner. We can see how idols throughout the ages have been used to deflect anxiety away from leadership to some group that will not bow to the idol. I think we also see why in the Reformed tradition, idols are the anathema to the faith. As the first question in the Shorter Catechism says: What is the chief end of humanity? Humanity’s chief end to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. Idolatry in our tradition is a denial of the sovereignty of God and a sign of our lack of trust in God’s grace and love for us.

We can see why the concern for idolatry is important because in the story from Exodus the anxiety that focuses on the idol becomes so infectious that even God gets entangled. God wants to start over without the stiff necked people. Moses refuses to herd with God or blame the Hebrews (he will save that for other days and it will be up to God to show differentiated leadership.) Instead, Moses remains his own person (differentiates) and talks God into repentance, that is, changing God’s mind. I think Moses helps God to change God’s mind by keeping his eye on the vision: God’s covenant that started with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Israel and Leah and Rachel. The covenant was that God claimed these people and would make them a great nation, and they would serve as God’s people to heal a hurting world. Moses reminded God that adaptive change takes time and patience.

Two thousand years later, Paul writes a similar message to the Philippian church. Apparently some of the leaders in the church have butted heads and now the

congregation is wrapped in anxiety. In midst of the conflict, members have probably herded to Euodia's side or Syntyche's side, I'm sure blame has gone all around, and each side has been reactive to the other. In this conflict, Paul urges counterintuitive advice—be of the same mind in the Lord—he seems to be saying that Euodia and Syntyche should not be differentiated. But what Paul is saying is that the two women should not be wrapped up by their own anxieties, they should be imitating what they learned about Christ and to remember that they are connected by the vision and mission of Christ rather than their anxieties.

Paul then presents a list that is the opposite of societal regression:

1. Rejoice: we are to live in gratitude for what is given, not for what we don't have.
2. Gentleness: when anxious we are subject to reactivity and blaming, gentleness is maintaining a less anxious presence.
3. No worry: letting go of anxiety especially when it is not my anxiety.
4. Trust: God is present with us and our anxieties can be given up in prayer.
5. Peace: the result of the first attitudes and it grows as we continue our practice of rejoicing, gentleness, no worry, and trust.

Paul believes these practices lead to activities that leadership can use to build up community and to be supportive of the members of community. Instead of relying on idols, the community can grow in its trust of God and one another.

I had a serendipitous experience last week in regard to these readings last week. Session has been working through parts of Joan Gray's book, Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers. The section we discussed was on risk taking; when leadership in a church might suggest change, they may experience pushback and sabotage because, as you know, the six deadliest words in a church are: We have never done that before. Gray reminds us that God calls us forward and we cannot let old ways become idols. Leadership in a church must be willing to take risks and not get enmeshed in reactivity, blame, or sabotage. We become less anxious by trusting in God's love and grace rather than succumbing to idols of fear and blame.

When the world is wrapped in chronic anxiety, the church can be a place of change and hope. God is present with us, how can we not rejoice? Let us proceed with gentleness, fearlessness, trust, and peace.