

Sacred Texts for Beloved Community 2 *In This Together*

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From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

September 14, 2025

Exodus 32:7-14

⁷ The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ 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!’ ” ⁹ The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ 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? ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.’ ” ¹⁴ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸ “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

In the mid-1990's a tropical storm stalled over south Georgia and caused severe flooding – as Helene did last year in western North Carolina. In the spring of the following year the church I was serving in Decatur, Georgia, sent a work team of volunteers to help the clean up and rebuilding. Larry and I joined the effort, and our group made the week a multifaceted experience. On Sunday of that mission trip we went to Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, to hear Jimmy Carter teach Sunday school. After Larry and I took our seats, Rosalyn Carter and a friend came and sat directly behind us. Frankly, I don't remember what the lesson was about but we will never forget this. President Carter started talking about all the big theologically heavily-laden words used to describe God - omniscient, omnipresent, almighty, immutable and unchanging. And just behind us, Rosalyn Carter started whispering to her friend, "Well, I don't believe that at all. What Jimmy is saying. God is not immutable and unchanging. I think God can change his mind whenever he wants to." You know, it was kind of hard to pay attention after that. We'd gone to hear the former President of the United States teach Sunday school, and our takeaway was a glimpse inside his marriage! And perhaps, the realization that the First Lady had a better recollection of the God we just heard about in our reading from Exodus – a story in which God's mind is changed.

Moses has been up on the mountain inscribing the Ten Commandments in stone, and the people below have grown impatient. They did not want to wait for Moses or God hidden up there in clouds and glory. In Moses' absence, they had time to think about the god they would prefer, and decided they wanted a god like other nations had; one they could carry around with them, take into battle, or put where they wanted. So Moses' brother, Aaron, said - take off your jewelry, melt it down and make a golden calf. A festival of worship was declared; sacrifices offered. Well, the God who had just sent ten plagues Pharaoh's way, and parted the sea to bring the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt into freedom is not pleased. Enraged at this impatient, ungrateful people, God is about to do them in with hot wrath and fury, but Moses pleads with God not to destroy them. He even makes the case that it would look really bad before the Egyptians! Moses reminds God of the promises made to make of them a great nation. And we are told, "the Lord changed his mind."

There is something in our human nature that wants the undeserving to get their just deserts. Here, we learn that it even crosses God's mind, to lead with retribution, but God stops, rethinks, and chooses redemption and restoration. For decades many of us have found solace and hope in Rabbi Harold Kushner's classic *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. With gentle biblical wisdom he wrote about how both good and bad things

happen to us, often inexplicable and due to the natural consequences of an imperfect world: seemingly random things like cancer, accidents, natural disaster, gunfire taking the lives of precious human beings. When bad things happen to good people, Kushner reminded us, they have nothing to do with God's doing or our own righteousness. What a lot of people seem to be yearning for these days is a variation on the question – Why don't bad things happen to bad people !?!

Ours is a rising tide of violent and cruel behavior toward others. Every day enemies are being added to long lists for the purposes of revenge, retaliation, exclusion. The assassination of Charlie Kirk this week is horrifically tragic, but sadly just one in a long line of recent politically motivated acts of violence. Since the violent mob stormed the Capital in 2021 to overturn the election, we've seen the plot to kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer, the assault on Paul Pelosi, attempts to assassinate President Trump, our own Governor Shapiro's house firebombed during Passover, State Senator Melissa Hortman and her husband killed. And while these high profile cases are in the spotlight, there's been one school shooting after another and a barrage of threats to the safety of college campuses. If we, people of faith, forget our call to build community among God's diverse humanity We are normalizing violence, and furthering the plunge to new depths of incivility.

As Ezra Klein wrote this week, “American politics has sides. But both sides are meant to be on the same side of a larger project – trying to maintain the viability of the American experiment. We can live with losing an election because we believe in the promise of the next election... Political violence imperils that. It’s supposed to be an argument, not a war; it is supposed to be won with words, not end with bullets.”¹

It’s helpful to remember that when God got really angry at the people’s idolatry, God almost let divine wrath rain down to kill and destroy. Instead, God’s mind was changed; God stayed faithful to promises made that through this people all the families of the earth would be blessed. And so should we. I like to imagine that Jesus may have had this pivotal story from Exodus in mind when he told the parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin. The starting point is the same, the natural desire for harsh judgment, the casting away of a certain kind of people. The religious thinkers of the day, The Pharisees and scribes, were displaying their righteous indignation when they grumbled about Jesus saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Jesus responded with parables to make us think about the importance God places on restoring people to community. A lost sheep, for all practical purposes, is a dead sheep; away from the protection of the fold and the Shepherd, a wolf’s

¹ Ezra Klein, “Charlie Kirk Was Practicing Politics the Right Way,” The New York Times, 9/11/25.

supper. Likewise, a lost coin is a dead asset. The woman's coin, we are told, is silver, a drachma, the wage of one day's earnings. Without it, she is not destitute, but it has value nonetheless.² Jesus says the sheep is given life, and the coin is given value, by the Shepherd and the Woman who search for, find and restore them. Then they throw a party!

In their restoration we discover not only their individual value, but that of the community who needs them to be whole again. The church is meant to show forth this holy intention for genuine human community, especially in today's violent season of incivility. Amid all that divides us, we welcome sinners and eat with them, demonstrating the radical inclusion God intends for human flourishing.

Not quite a year ago, the movie "Conclave" was released, offering a fascinating, albeit fictional, glimpse inside the dynamics of electing a new Pope to head the Catholic church. The church's cardinals gather in Rome, and are sequestered in their living quarters. Then, varied in their strong views about the mission of the church, they begin their networking, taking sides against one another, some promoting a more conservative choice, others the more liberal leanings of a changing church. What global community should the new Pope come from? They argue. Should the next

² John Carroll, Luke: A Commentary.

Pope continue the good work of the one who just died, or set the church in another direction? Just months following the film's release, when Pope Francis died, news reports said that the cardinals were actually watching the movie to gain insight into the secretive process. At one point, when clear divisions among the cardinals are reaching a fevered pitch, the Dean of the College of Cardinals, preaches a homily. According to the *National Catholic Register*, the homily included some of Pope Francis' actual words.

Just before they enter the Sistine Chapel to begin their voting, Cardinal Lawrence begins: "Let me speak from the heart for a moment. St. Paul said, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ". To work together and to grow together we must be tolerant - no one person or faction seeking to dominate another.... Paul reminds us that God's gift to the Church is its variety. It is this variety, this diversity of people and views, which gives our Church its strength." He urges them to remember what it takes to live in community with such diversity saying: " Over the many years, in the service of our church, let me tell you, there is one sin which I have come to fear above all others: certainty. Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance... Our faith is a living thing, precisely because it walks hand-in-hand with doubt. If there were only certainty, and no doubt, there would be no mystery, and

therefore no need for faith. Let us pray that God will grant us a Pope who doubts. And let God grant us a Pope who sins and asks for forgiveness. And who carries on.”³

From within the church we must look upon today’s violent division differently than is so often proclaimed by divisive politicians. Our certain world views must be tempered with humility and openness to civil engagement with one another, not violence. When God became enraged at the people’s idolatry, God turned away from the option of violence. With a change of mind, God remained faithful to ancient promises to bless all families of the earth. When the scribes and Pharisees started judging Jesus for welcoming sinners, Jesus reminded us that our sin is over-matched by God’s grace. So we who are made in the image and likeness of God are called to this way of life.

In this time of divisive anger and name-calling, of seeking revenge and retribution, of violent reactions and cruelty, the church is being called to a counter-cultural mission. This does not mean that we let anything go. What it means is, we encourage civil discourse; we seek the truth in a culture of lies. We cherish diversity in a world hell-bent on exclusion; we work for equity and justice. We honor God’s desire that every human

³ I am grateful to BMPC member, Bill Black, for giving me a transcript of this homily from Conclave.

person be valued; our diverse variety makes us interdependent and gives our church its strength. Diversity gives our humanity its unity. We cling to the belief that all people belong to God, therefore we are in this enterprise of human community together.

AMEN.