

Text: Exodus 32:1-14

Date: July 29, 2018

Focus: Jesus freely gives us the acceptance, love, and validation we are looking for and need.

Function: As Christians, having already received everything we need in Jesus, we seek to please God rather than people.

In Jesus Name, Amen.

As I mentioned earlier, today we are continuing our series called “Portraits of Grace” as we look at the lives of some men and women in whom and through whom and for whom God poured out grace. And today we are looking at the life of Aaron.

I don’t know what you all know or remember about Aaron, the brother of Moses, but I think that at least some of us can relate to him. Now, if you don’t believe me, or if you just don’t remember much about the man, I’m going to ask you a series of questions – you don’t have to answer out loud or even raise your hand, but if you answer yes to any of these questions – you might be like Aaron.

So. Number 1. Do you find it near to impossible to say “no” when someone asks you to do something? Another way of saying this is do you always say yes when someone asks you to do something even if you really want to say no? Well, then you might be like Aaron.

Number 2. Do you make sure that everyone around you is ok even to the complete detriment of your own well-being and health? Well, then you might be like Aaron.

Number 3. Do you find that you are constantly exhausted and never well rested because if even if you aren’t busy serving someone else, you are worrying about them and what they think about you? Well, then you might be like Aaron.

Number 4. Do you harbor a quiet, inner resentment towards people that you outwardly smile at? Well, you might be like Aaron.

And, finally, number 5. Have you found yourself in a toxic, unhealthy relationship in which you are taken advantage of? Well, then you might be like Aaron. And, you just might be a people-pleaser.

Like so many of the people we are going to be taking a look at, today we are going to see that Aaron was a generally good and faithful man, but a man who had his faults just like all of us. And one of Aaron’s shortcomings that we’re going to see today is that Aaron, maybe like some of us is a chronic people-pleaser. Aaron, maybe like some of us, has a tendency to crave external validation from the people around him. He wants to be welcomed and accepted and loved – and uses the other people in his life to give him those things. And we see that play out in our reading for today from Exodus 32.

Now, before we get to our story, let me give you a little background on Aaron. Aaron, as I said earlier, was the older brother of Moses who we looked at last week. He was 3 years older, actually. While Moses was the head-honcho of the Israelites, Aaron played an important role in the lives of God’s people. His first role was that of spokes-person. Moses wasn’t the best communicator, and so Aaron was almost like his modern-day press-secretary or media relations boss.

Aaron was also an amazing sidekick. He was a natural supporter and encourager. And we see that in Exodus 17. In Exodus 17 the Israelites have gone out to battle against the Amalekites. And while the battle is raging, whenever Moses has his arms lifted up, the Israelites do well. They win. And whenever his hands went down, the Israelites began to lose. And so, it’s Aaron who helps lift up Moses

arms so that God's people can win the battle. Aaron plays an important, even a crucial role. If he were going to win an Oscar, it would be for Best Supporting Actor.

Eventually, Aaron would become the Chief Priest of the Israelites. The priests were the one who appeased God through the making of sacrifices for the sins of the people. They were the ones who interceding on behalf of the Israelites. And Aaron was the head priest. The priest of all priests. The Senior Pastor.

And then, the last kind of cool thing about Aaron is that it is his blessing – the blessing that he gave to the people of Israel, that we use here today. We close our time here at Living Christ with a blessing that goes like this: May the Lord bless you and keep you..." And we get that from Aaron. Pretty cool that God's people have continued to use that blessing for thousands of years, huh?

There is a lot to like and admire about Aaron. But, today we also see his shortcomings. And his primary one is that he seeks to please people rather than God. He's more concerned about appeasing the whims of the people than about honoring the Word of the Lord. He's more worried about what people think of him, then of how God has told him to live.

In our reading for today we are at a point in Israel's story where Moses is up on a mountain talking with God and receiving the 10 commandments. And he's been up there for forty days. Which is a lot longer than he's ever disappeared for before. And while he's up there the Israelites are confused and maybe scared. They don't know what's happened to Moses. If he's fallen of a ledge or been eaten by a goat. They don't know where he is or when he's coming back, but what they do know is that they need something to hold onto. And so in their confusion and fear and doubt they demand that Aaron make them an idol. "Come, make us gods" they demand of him. And Aaron, the Chief Priest, the one who stands before the Holy God on behalf of the people, the one who is God's representative on earth, who gets closer to God than anyone else, who is charged with leading and teaching the people in His ways, gives in. He tells the people to take off and collect together their gold jewelry, and then he fashions that gold into a calf. Aaron is more concerned about making these people happy than he is about following after God's commandment. He is more worried about their anger and frustration than he is about God's wrath. He seeks after their validation rather than the Father's. He looks for their acceptance rather than Yahweh's. In order to be accepted by the people he directly disobeys the first and greatest commandment "You shall have no other gods".

Of course, this infuriates God, and eventually Moses who will later smash the tablets of the 10 commandments out of frustration. 3,000 people die as a result of the sin that took place that day. But we are able to learn an important lesson: You can't try to please God AND people. One of those two will always win out. Either you'll end up pleasing God or people.

For those of us, myself included, who are people pleasers, this is a harsh reminder and lesson for us. But, it's one we need to hear. When it comes to following God, there can be no compromises. Trying to please people at the expense of following God's ways will always lead to idolatry. Maybe not golden calf idolatry, but it will always lead us away from the Lord. Today we are reminded of the harsh consequences that come from being a people-pleaser. While it makes us feel good in the moment, constantly trying to please people rather than god will lead to disaster.

There is a piece of each of us – even the most self-assured, confident, and faithful of us that likes to please people. I've seen it in parents whose kids could be lighting the house on fire and they will be making excuses like, "Well, I probably kept them up too late last night" or "It's my fault, I forgot to cut the crusts of their sandwich this morning." Sometimes parents want to appease their children rather than doing the right thing. I've seen it happen to people in romantic relationships. Otherwise normal, rational,

well-adjusted people will sell themselves out and do things they never otherwise would do, and give themselves over to this toxic-relationship in order to please a significant other. All of us, on some level, at one time or another are people-pleasers. We look to other people for validation, acceptance, and love.

Here's a dirty little secret about people pleasers: On the outside it looks like we have the best interests of other people at mind, like we give and give and give, but often it's really all about us. We're just using other people for validation and acceptance and love.

But, brothers and sisters, here is the Good News for us. All of the acceptance and validation and welcoming and love that we are looking for in other people – that we are striving after – we already have that in Jesus. And it's totally free! You see, by making that calf Aaron was looking for acceptance and validation and love, but the truth is he already had all that from God. And so do we. We are loved by Jesus. He accepts you. Jesus welcomes you in by faith and faith alone. And there is nothing you need to do that could ever make you more pleased with him.

If you find that you are like Aaron, there's also other good news for us in today's reading: God will continue to use you. God's not giving up on you. While there were consequences for Aaron's sin, God would also show him amazing compassion and mercy and continue to work through him. God continued to work through him as a man and as the Chief Priest. That past sin didn't disqualify him from being an important cog in God's kingdom. And it's the same for the rest of us who consider ourselves people pleasers. God will continue to use you.

The really cool thing that happens when you start to trust that everything that you used to look for from people, is already yours in Christ, when you start to trust that you have all the validation and acceptance and love you need from Jesus – that then frees you SERVE people rather than merely please them. When you start to trust that God is pleased with you because of your high priest Jesus and because of the sacrifice He made on your behalf, when you believe that you are richly and undeservedly blessed and forgiven and loved – you are freed to go out to your family and neighbors and friends with so much more to give. When you truly live by faith, trusting in that what Jesus has done for you on the cross is more than enough, you can go out and sacrifice out of selfless love, not in order to get something back.

Brothers and sisters, believe it or not, God has so much more love and acceptance to give you than anyone else can possibly give you. God is pleased with you.

In Jesus Name, Amen.