



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 14 – Proper 19 Year C

The Wrath of God

[RCL]: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

“The wrath of God is his relentless compassion, pursuing us even when we are at our worst. Lord, give us mercy to bear your mercy.”

- Maggie Ross, from The Fire of Your Life

Perhaps it helps us to remember that the fourteenth chapter of Luke concludes, “Let anyone with ears to hear *listen!*” Then we hear, “All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to *listen* to Jesus.” Tax collectors were reviled because in the depressed economy of first-century Israel under Roman occupation, some of the people had taken the only jobs they could find: collecting taxes for the emperor. For this, they were reviled and seen as traitors. As to sinners, well, Jeremiah 4 and Psalm 14 pretty well sum things up with phrases such as: “They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good,” “My people are foolish, they do not know me,” “The Lord looks down from heaven upon us all, to see if there is any who is wise, if there is one who seeks after God. Every one has proved faithless; all alike have turned bad.”

The only comfort in such pronouncements is that we are all in this together! What is interesting in these little parabolic stories in Luke 15 is that some new folks are drawing near “to listen”: the Pharisees and scribes, that is those who most often challenge Jesus to test and sniff out his orthodoxy. They have yet to grasp that we are all in this together and sneer, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Perhaps Jesus tells these stories as he notices that his simple practice of hospitality toward all persons has attracted a new group of listeners!

A sheep and a coin are lost. Their owners go to great lengths to find them, presumably a shepherd, which were most often men, and a housewife, a woman. Shepherds had particularly nasty reputations and were considered so outside the boundaries of civil life that they were not allowed to testify in legal proceedings. And yet, in Luke’s story of Jesus, they are the first to announce, to testify, to the birth of the Christ child!

Going to the heart of these stories, the shepherd and the woman play the part of God. Despite the ongoing angst of some at having to admit it, the Bible frequently depicts God as a woman: as a mother nursing her child, as a mother hen gathering her chicks, and as this woman searching for a lost sinner. God

is depicted as a woman! And here Jesus tells us what the parables are about: lost sinners are found and God and the angels in heaven rejoice. We might note in both stories the result is the same; both the shepherd and the woman invite all their neighbors, as in all, everyone without qualification, to “Rejoice with me, for I have found [that which] was lost.” There is more joy over one sinner who is found than any 99 who have no need for repentance.

There’s the rub. We try to understand the joke implied in Jesus’ conclusion by making confession every Sunday either in the Eucharist or Morning Prayer. But often, we are like the scribes and Pharisees who think everyone else but them needs to repent, to turn, turn till they “come round right” as the Shaker hymn has it.

We can assume Jesus knows who is surrounding him to listen. The scribes and Pharisees are newly interested. They are sneering at the crowd with no understanding whatsoever that they are now actually part of the very crowd at which they sneer! Sneering ranks low on the scale of Biblical virtues and high on the scale of sin itself.

There are lessons for all who have ears and listen – really truly listen to what’s going on here. For what we have is a story of God’s unstoppable goodness – God’s unstoppable love and compassion for all people, all creatures, and all creation itself. We are to note the great risk the shepherd takes in leaving the 99 in the wilderness while he pursues his search for the one who is lost – because as anyone who knows anything at all about sheep can tell you, when he gets back they will be as good as gone! Yet he still throws a party for everyone, which no doubt will cost him more than the value of the one sheep he has spent all his energy to find! Perhaps neither the tax collectors nor the sinners are lost, except in the narrow eyes and stereotyping of the scribes and Pharisees.

Similarly, the woman will have had to set aside all her daily household chores. She disrupts the world of her home – and, as extended families tended to live in several attached buildings or tents, the daily life of those in her whole family – just to find the one coin that may not in itself cover the cost for the block and neighborhood party she throws to rejoice!

What these stories are meant to do, by Jesus’ own interpretation, is to contrast the value system of Jesus’ challengers with that of heaven and God and the angels whom Jesus represents. And although the challengers object to the presence of tax collectors and sinners, surely even they would rejoice at one of those who turns, repents, and is found.

Given that Jesus says, “Let those with ears to hear listen,” is it too much to presume that the very presence of tax collectors and sinners who come to listen have made a first step in turning, in repenting? We would be remiss not to note that the parables are in part Jesus’ way of responding to the objections of his challengers in such a way that they might listen and hear – that they might know that there is still room for repentance in their value system to let go of stereotyping others who are not at all like them.

In a world in which demeaning others has become the commonplace, everyday rhetoric of people on all sides of all conflicts, can we place ourselves in this crowd of tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes and listen to what is being said?

Until we accept that we are all lost, how can we ever be found? Because the witness of the Biblical story from Genesis to Revelation is that our God is indeed relentlessly compassionate, pursuing us even when we are at our worst.

To recall and slightly amend the words of Maggie Ross, “Christ, give us mercy to bear and accept your Mercy!” For the acceptance of God’s mercy, love, and compassion requires us all to turn, to change, to repent of all thoughts and behaviors that stereotype and demean others. For in such turning will be our salvation. And our salvation is a gift from that power that is much greater than we are. And these stories are talking of the salvation of our whole community, the whole world, united in rejoicing that we have all finally turned and abandoned all rhetoric of exclusion!

Thank God for God’s wrath, for one day we will be found.

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