

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Luke 15:1-10 (NRSV)

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. [2] And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

[3] So he 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] 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 sheep that was lost.' [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] 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."

CAN A MUSLIM BE SAVED?

This past Tuesday I spent all day at a big church meeting. In the Presbyterian Church we call those meetings Presbytery.

I found out one thing last Tuesday. There's at least one church in our Presbytery that has harder pews than this one! My ability to sit was just about to end, and I was praying fervently that our meeting would soon be over.

My prayers were not answered. A young lady, a candidate for the ministry was being examined. And someone asked her this question, "Can a Muslim be saved?" The candidate answered, "I don't know."

I cringed when I heard her answer. “I don’t know,” is not considered a good answer when you are being examined for the ministry on the floor of Presbytery. I began to wonder how much longer I might be on that hard seat.

I would have recommended that the candidate answer in a different way, but I think I understand why she answered as she did. The Bible teaches us that salvation does not depend upon our judgment but upon the gracious choice of Almighty God. A little uncertainty when it comes to the eternal state of any person is probably a good thing. Only God can judge.

I like the way The Second Helvetic Confession, one of the confessions of recognized as authoritative by our church puts it, “God knows who are his ... we must hope well of all, and not rashly judge any man [or woman] to be a reprobate.” The Confession goes on to say that we should not be so curious about the salvation of other people. Instead we should be more worried our own life. We need to keep ourselves on that straight and narrow path that leads to salvation. (5.055-560)

In church history we have some chilling examples of people being “forced” to convert to the Christian faith because some religious leaders thought that Jesus was the way, the truth and the life. Some were even tortured in the name of Christ. Wars were fought in the name of Christ. The bad feelings that exist today between many Christians and Muslims can be traced to these bloody battles over whose way of salvation was correct.

Today, the question is being asked the other way round. Muslims are asking, “Can Christians be saved?” And some Muslims are saying no. The only hope for our country and for us says the radicals are for Americans to convert to Islam. So far not many have been converted by that approach to evangelism!

In the heat created by our theological discussion at Presbytery, someone remarked that if we said that a Muslim couldn’t be saved then we were condemning a large portion of the world to hell. That didn’t seem like a very good way to put it either.

Yes, when it comes to the final decision about a person's salvation, that decision is up to God. We can't (and shouldn't) make any pronouncements about a person's salvation. God waits until the end, and so should we.

But, it is also true that the God revealed in Jesus Christ in the Bible is quite different from the God revealed by Mohammed in the Koran. The Bible does indeed say that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. The Bible does say, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by whom we must be saved." Acts 4:12 (NRSV)

And even a cursory examination of these two great world religions shows that we profoundly disagree about the nature of God.

These cannot be (as is often foolishly said) two different paths to the same God. One has to be wrong and one has to be right. Any dialogue that overlooks these profound differences does a disservice to Christianity and to Islam.

In fact, the God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who is different from any other world religion because the God revealed in Jesus is a God who brings us salvation by grace and not by works. It is not a salvation that we can proudly wear like a badge of honor. It is only a gift that we can humbly accept.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is not a passive god who just lets life unfold. Truth and faith as revealed in Jesus is not about our drop of cosmic energy being added to the infinite ocean of divinity.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ reaches out to us. The God revealed in the Bible and especially in Christ is a God who strives for us and with us. God as revealed in the Bible is concerned with all of us, individually and personally. God cares about what happens to you and to me. God knows our name.

In order to call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ, we have to understand how the teachings of Jesus about the nature of God differ from other religions and other philosophies. If Jesus is the only way, exactly what is that way?

GOD SEEKS THE LOST

Today's lesson from the gospel of Luke gives us a simple description of God's nature in parable form. As I've often said, a parable is an "earthly story with a heavenly meaning".

We shouldn't worry too much about sheep and shepherds or the importance of housecleaning when we read these stories. In the final analysis, they're not about that. These are symbolic stories that reveal the heart and soul of God.

What is God like? Well, God is like a shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep who are safe at home in order to find the one that is lost. God is one who seeks and saves the lost. And when that lost sheep or lost coin or lost son is found, God throws a party in heaven that even the angels don't want to miss.

It's important to understand why Jesus told these very familiar parables. He told them to answer the complaints of religious leaders. The scribes and Pharisees were grumbling about the company Jesus was keeping. Jesus was welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus was spending time with people who were morally deficient.

The tax collectors were stooges for the Roman IRS. They lined their pockets by collecting too much money. They were traitors to their own country. And those referred to as "sinners" were people with loose morals. If they lived today a good number of them would be found online on the convicted sex offender list.

Now you can begin to understand why the religious leaders were so upset with Jesus. They believed that a person is known by the company they keep, that birds of a feather flock together. And they also thought that morally loose people should be judged ... harshly. If someone is a drag on society they should be shunned.

And so when Jesus, one who was widely believed to be an important religious teacher and prophet was seen eating and drinking with these known sinners, the religious leaders concluded that one of two things had to be true. Either he wasn't much of a prophet and foolishly didn't know what kind of

people he was associating with, or he was condoning the lifestyle of these misfits by his presence with them.

That caused the religious leaders to grumble.

As it turns out, neither of those conclusions was true. Jesus knew very well the weaknesses of these people, and he certainly did not condone the lifestyle.

Instead, he came among these people who were lost to offer an unexpected word of forgiveness.

He came to tell them that they don't have to live the way they are living. There was hope.

There was a better way. They could repent. They could go in a different direction. God was willing to welcome them home.

I believe that by the power of God's Word and Spirit there is hope for all people, especially those who seem far from the promises of God because this passage teaches us that God is especially interested in those who are lost in the far country.

God is a seeking God.

God is a compassionate and merciful God who does not shun even one who could be a part of the Kingdom.

GOD IS SEEKING US

What are these parables saying to us?

First, they tell us that when we are lost, God is seeking to bring us back home. This can happen to all of us from time to time.

Sometimes we lose our way. Sometimes we get bogged down by the problems of life. Sometimes we doubt the promises of God and separate ourselves from God's people. Sometimes we become involved in a way of living that is destructive.

And that breaks God's heart. This is not the life that God would have us lead. And so as a shepherd seeks the one lamb that is lost, God seeks us. And when he finds us God carries us back home on his shoulders and throws a party.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day couldn't appreciate the power of this promise because they couldn't identify with the lost. They weren't like a lamb lost in the wilderness or a son who had left home to sow his wild oats.

They saw themselves as good. The other guys were the ones who needed to repent, not them. And because of that they were very judgmental and rigid in their approach to life.

THE TROUBLE WITH TRYING TO BE GOOD

The past two weeks our adult Sunday school class has been studying the origins of sin. And one of the surprising things we learned is that sin often comes from wanting to be "good". For example, in the story of the original sin, the story of Adam and Eve, they ate the forbidden fruit because they wanted to be like God; they wanted to be able to judge the good for themselves.

But, in doing this they disobeyed the commandment of God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And when God confronted them with their sin, what did they do? They blamed their sin on someone else and even on God. Adam said, "This woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree."

And how did Eve respond to that charge? She said blamed the serpent. "Lord, why in the world would you ever make anything like this serpent. He tricked me. It wasn't my fault."

But, neither Adam nor Eve did what they should have done. They didn't admit their own guilt. They didn't say, "It was my fault. I have sinned." No, they blamed someone else or they even blamed God.

I told my class last week that the story of Adam and Eve is the most historical story in the whole Bible. It's the most historical in that history repeats itself.

Adam and Eve tried to pass the buck so that they could still see themselves as blameless in their actions and men and women have been doing the same thing down through the ages. We think that we're the ones who are saved and those other guys are the ones who are lost. We're in the right; they're in the wrong.

As the author of our study last week put it, "The rich tell us that the poor have too many children and are a burden on the economy. The poor tell us that the rich are immoral and greedy. All draw the line between good and evil, place their enemies on the evil side, and justify their own identity."

That's why the religious leaders of Jesus' day were so upset with what Jesus was doing. In their minds, Jesus was blurring the line between good and evil. Jesus was eating in the enemy camp. Instead of using these morally challenged people as scapegoats, instead of suggesting that they were the reason that society was going down the tubes, Jesus welcomed these questionable people into his life.

In a statement that some of my Sunday school class found challenging the author said, "The good news of the Christian gospel is that in Jesus Christ, God places the divine on the evil side of the line between good and evil. God in Christ takes refuge among the sinners and scapegoats ... God in Jesus Christ becomes the perfect scapegoat. God is willing to absorb the slings and arrows of human sin in order to redeem and reconcile. God forgives us our sins. This forgiveness is what justifies us, not our identification with what we think is good."

Let me put it another way. The apostle Paul wrote that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." In other words, from God's standpoint we are all in the category of sinner and tax collector. We have all fallen considerably short of who we should be. We are all lost lambs.

And until we acknowledge that, until we see ourselves as sinners without hope save for the grace of God, we will continue to flail about trying to

identify with the good. What we are essentially trying to do is save ourselves, and that just won't work.

We will demonize the enemy. We will concentrate on the splinter in our neighbor's eye while not noticing the log in our own eye. We will blame others so that we might make ourselves look good and in doing that we will isolate ourselves from the salvation of God.

Today's lesson is good news for sinners. God loves them, and God seeks to save them. And that means God loves you and me, and seeks to save us.

SEEKING THE LOST SHEEP

The second lesson that we learn from today's lesson is that God wants us to become a part of this hunt for lost sheep. If God cares about those who are lost, shouldn't we care too?

Before Jesus left his disciples he charged them to go into the whole world and make disciples, teaching them to do everything that Jesus had commanded them to do. In other words, Jesus wanted them to seek the lost.

One reason that some members of Presbytery were disturbed when our candidate for the ministry couldn't answer clearly the question about who can be saved is that through we don't want to prematurely condemn people; we also don't want to abandon them either.

I think that when we say in the name of being broadminded that there are many paths to God and then do nothing to bring the message to others who don't have it, we are really being disobedient to the call of Christ.

At that same Presbytery meeting in which we struggled with this thorny question we also listened to a wonderful sermon about the need for mission. The title of the sermon was "Ya gotta go!"

In a very amusing and colorful way the preacher donned different hats and costumes from around the world, and talked about the need to preach the gospel. He said that we needed to preach in word and deed throughout the world and in our own area.

He said that this was a responsibility that we all shared. All of us are included in the great commission. All of us are responsible for seeking the lost.

In order to illustrate that responsibility he recalled a story from the Old Testament. Before the Israelites were to enter the Promised Land they had to cross the flood swollen Jordan River. God commanded that those who carried the Ark of the Covenant should step into that fast flowing river first.

The preacher wondered if the people who were scheduled to carry the Ark that day were uncomfortable with the idea and maybe tried to pass off the job to somebody else. You can walk that Ark into the Jordan today Joe. I'll be right behind you brother! Maybe nobody wanted to be the first to get their feet wet.

Someone did finally take the Ark into the Jordan, and once again God did a miracle. Dry ground appeared. The flood swollen river dammed up in front of them, and the people went into the Promised Land.

And the preacher made his point. He said, "If you're going to follow God, sometimes you've got to get your feet wet!" And if we're going to follow Jesus, if we really believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, sometime we're going to have to get our feet wet too. We too must learn to seek the lost and rescue the perishing in the name of Christ.

QUITTING IS NOT AN OPTION

When I talked about the implications of this passage with my Bible studies this past week, they all agreed that a mandate to seek the lost seemed to be implied by this passage. But, they also all agreed that such a mandate was often very threatening.

In fact sometimes stepping into a flood swollen river seemed like a lot easier thing to do than sharing the gospel with the lost. They said that some in their communities were quite resistant to and even hostile to the gospel. Some talked about those who shared the grace of God in a very ungracious way.

I suspect that the same could be said of some in your community. There are those who are resistant to the gospel and there are those who want to beat you in the head with the gospel.

What are we to do in the face of such opposition and antagonism?

A minister told of being stopped on the street by a woman who had a problem. She was not a member of his congregation, but when she recognized him as a minister, she just had to tell her story.

It seems that the daughter of her deceased sister had fallen into a lifestyle that was taking her down a very dark path. She had tried several times to help this young girl but all her efforts had been rebuffed.

After spilling out the story and with tears in her eyes she asked the minister, "Do you know anything else that I might do?" The minister thought for a while and was just beginning to answer when the woman blurted out her own answer.

She said, "I know what I'm going to do. I'm going back down there to see her again and try one more time because I love her and quitting ain't an option!"

That's what I believe. I believe that for the loving God revealed in Jesus Christ "quitting ain't an option".

That wasn't what the religious leaders of Jesus day thought. They thought that some people were beyond saving. And I sometimes wonder if that's what some people in the church today believe as well. They think that there are some infidels who are just beyond saving.

But, I don't believe we have the option of thinking that way. If we really believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, that no one comes to the Father but by him, then we need to get our ways aligned with God's ways.

Don't quit on yourself, and don't quit on others. Our God seeks the lost. Our God wants to bring redemption into this broken world. And quite often he chooses people like you and me to seek the lost.

God help us stand up to those who think that some are already lost forever.
God give us the hope and courage we need to seek the lost in his Name ...
even as God is continuing to seek and save us.

Amen.