

Grace

After church last Sunday, as I was minding my own business walking through the parking lot, one of my friends here loped up beside me and started wondering aloud just what the heck all that hate your family stuff was all about.

Coward that I am, I pointed my finger at Jesus: “hey man, his words, not mine!”

But the gist of my friend’s wondering was whether Jesus was saying “hate” as in despise, or “hate” as in detach?

And we agreed that since Jesus never seems to despise anyone, most likely what he’s driving at is a healthy detachment, but using harsh language to get our attention, and, I’m happy to report, he got the attention of at least one member of our community last week.

I bring this up because today’s parables that we heard in the gospel lesson have Jesus heading in the same direction he was heading last week, except that instead of using a baseball bat like last week, he switches gears and finds yet another way to shake us out of what we think we know -- so that maybe we can catch a glimpse of who we are meant to become.

Last week Jesus was challenging us not to turn our families into idols, not to turn our possessions into idols.

We worship idols when whatever we worship, whatever we adore, whatever we give ourselves over to -- is not God.

So last week we had the no nonsense warning not to turn mom or dad, sister or brother or spouse, or our stuff, for that matter, into an idol.

Today, what Jesus is knocking down is our oh so human need to turn religion into an idol - or more correctly - how we try to turn faith into an idol.

What does that possibly mean?

Well, let me ask you a question.

How many of you agree that a key part of being a Christian is to live a moral life, do good things, so when we die we will merit entry into heaven?

Hands please.

You are in good company.

The Pharisees who are upset with Jesus today for having burgers and fries with all the riffraff agree with you.

In fact, each and every religion known to humanity agrees with you.

Because religion is all about what people need to do in order to please the gods or The God as the case may be.

Religion is all about us, people, seeking God.

And so with religion we get rules and regulations, we get social arrangements that include some while keeping others as far away as possible, and we get constant direction on what we need to do to please the gods, to please The God, as the case may be.

So put religion here in your left hand (don't drop it!), and while you're holding on to it, let's look again at the parables today.

The lamb is lost.

The coin is lost.

And while we may be tempted to see ourselves as the searching shepherd or the searching housewife, or among the sheep that aren't lost or among the coins still in the purse; try these stories on as if you are the lost lamb, as if you are the missing coin.

Try them on that way because there's little doubt that's how Jesus sees us.

Just listen to what the Holy Spirit, through St. Paul, says about our condition:

“There are none who are righteous, no not one.”

“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Or, lend an ear to what Jesus says:

“He said to the Pharisees, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But because you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.’”

It is God in these two parables who is the shepherd; it is God who is the peasant housewife, (and if you're wondering about the 99 who need no repentance, see those quotes above from Paul and Jesus....)

So I ask you, fellow sheep, I ask you, fellow coins, what do lost sheep and lost coins do?

Do they embark on good works and thus deserve to be found?

Do they give a shout out to at least assist in their being found?

Do they do anything at all to deserve being found?

You know the answer as well as I do.

Lost sheep are as good as dead sheep because left alone, they are dinner for the next lion, tiger or bear who wanders by.

Lost sheep hide and they shut up.

Lost coins are inanimate objects, they just lay there.

All of the effort, all of the credit, all of the benefit comes from the one who's doing the searching, the one who's doing the finding, and that one is God.

And that, my friends, is why the Christian faith is not a religion, because according to Jesus, it's not we who seek God -- because nothing we do or don't do motivates the free and persistent grace of God that is always on the hunt for us, that is always seeking us out.

It's not up to us to secure our salvation, which is the whole point of religion.

Instead, because God foolishly, lavishly, mercifully, loves us, it is God who does all the work.

But, you plan to say to me later in the parking lot, what about the repentance Jesus speaks of?

That's what we need to do to get right with God, right?

Well, sort of.....

The repentance Jesus calls us to has very little to do with cleaning up our act or straightening up and flying right, because Jesus isn't talking about earning our salvation; Jesus is talking about metanoia -- a Greek word that means "to change my mind."

"To change my mind about what," you ask?

To change my mind about the entire nature of God's relationship with us -- and our relationship with each other -- that's what!

Jesus didn't come to start a new religion, Jesus came to put an end to religion by putting an end to sacrifices and obligation and personal merit and just desserts and trading all of that in -- for life -- for an abundant life; not when we die as a reward for a life well lived, but now, today, by taking the plunge, today, and participating in the life God is living among us right here, right now.

We see it in Paul's almost giddy letter written to his young charge Timothy.

Paul is beside himself with amazement that God judges Paul as faithful even though Paul's a murdering persecutor of the followers of Jesus.

Paul writes in absolute amazement that God shows him mercy even when he is an active enemy of God; that God judges him as faithful even while he's on his mission of murder.

And Paul is telling young Timmy, and he's telling the most jaded or damaged or angry or hopeless man or woman here: "If God can have mercy on me, God is guaranteed to have mercy on you; if God can find me, God will certainly find you."

Well, you may be thinking, if all of that's the case, if my salvation doesn't depend on me earning brownie points with God, then why am I cooling my jets here every Sunday in these pews?

Why bother with a pledge?

Why spend time going out of my way for others if God has it all in the bag anyway?

Why indeed?

If it's all about mercy, and not about merit, we can begin to let go of the tit for tat exchange-based relationships that we most of us live in every single day.

We can exhale, we can relax, and get in the party mood that God and the angels have been throwing since time began.

If we receive mercy at no cost to us, can we give mercy at no cost to each other?

If our salvation is free and unearned by our own efforts, can we give free and unearned embrace (or food or money or a shoulder to cry on or a shower), to those standing next to us?

Fr. Capon says:

"In none of these parables is anything, except the will of God, portrayed as necessary for the new life in joy. Neither the lostness nor the deadness, nor the repentance, is, in itself, redemptive. God alone gives life, and gives it freely on no conditions whatsoever. These stories therefore are stories of grace, and grace only. There is in them not a single note of earning or merit, not one breath about rewarding the rewardable, correcting the correctible, or improving the improvable. There is only the gracious, saving determination of the shepherd, the woman, surrogates of God to raise the dead!"

R. Capon, Parable of Grace, 187.

So why come here week after week, why call ourselves Christians and why do we look to Jesus to form our lives?

Because we know something about the world that the world doesn't know about itself.

Despite all appearances to the contrary, despite the wars and competitions and estrangements, we know, because we, when we repent, when we metanoia, when we change our minds, we begin to

see “that God is at work in the world making and keeping human life human.” Hall, *What Christianity is Not*, 123.

“In a real sense, the only difference between the church and the world is that the church, when it is attentive and faithful, knows something about the world that the world doesn’t know about itself, that it is greatly loved.

The difference between believers and unbelievers is not defined by church membership or even, in the last analysis, by baptism. The difference is defined by imagination and sensitivity to what God is doing in the world to make and keep human life human, to achieve the maturity of humankind, that is, the new humanity.” Id., at 122, quoting Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, 117.

This is why we are here, this is why we serve, and this is why we pledge -- to live daily as partners with God who for no better reason than love, loves us, and who invites us to go out and love one another.

We have travelled through many years believing God insists on legalities and “even exchanges” both in heaven and on earth.

Do the right thing, be the right thing, measure up, and God will reward you.

The law given to Israel can easily be read as just that type of system of rewards and punishment.

But the law just made lawyers out of nearly everyone, looking for loopholes, trying to squeak by with the minimal effort, setting up walls between who we say are the good and who we say are the evil.

It didn’t work.

The law turns folks into lawyers -- but grace, grace turns people into lovers.

And it goes without saying that lovers always have more fun at parties than lawyers; and it’s a party that God is preparing for every last one of us.

So, the word from the Lord this morning seems to be saying: "relax!"

"Lighten up!"

"And don’t be afraid little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom!"
Lk. 12:32.

+amen

