Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost All Saints Church

Homecoming Proper 19 September 15, 2019

Exodus 32:7-14 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Psalm 51:1-11 Luke 15:1-10

Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew a right spirit within us. Amen

In our readings this morning, we meet people who are arrogant, idolaters, blasphemers, persecutors, and men of violence. St. Paul includes himself as one of these people.

These Sinners. In a word, a “stiff-necked” people.

My uncle Sonny, my great uncle, who owned a sheep ranch, explained the history of being stiff-necked. He had a field on his property which he tilled with oxen. Two oxen were yoked together to plow. The yoke allowed you to prod and direct the oxen to make the correct turns. The last thing you wanted was a “stiff-necked” ox. They were useless- never to buy, but if you were foolish enough not to check and you did buy a stiff-necked ox, you would never be able to sell it. They couldn’t be trained. Those oxen refused to turn their heads in order to take a different path. And there was nothing you could do.

And so what characterizes a stiff-necked person? Stubborn, antagonistic, argumentative, willing to go into great detail to explain why they are right and you are wrong, high and mighty, impossible to work with, stilted, rigid, proud, unwilling to listen to what others may need or want. In a word, arrogant.

To be honest, we are all susceptible, especially when we are fearful, to be stiff-necked. It’s one of the reasons Jesus tells us that *his* yoke is easy; *his* burden light. By yoking with Jesus, turning with Jesus, allowing Jesus to “prod” us, we are giving ourselves over, so Jesus can take us to our deeper selves, where the love of God and our own power to love can be found. It’s one of the reasons, as priest, I wear a collar. I am yoked with God, by God, promising to be a living example of following the way of Jesus.

Not always easy to do! In that promise of following the way of Jesus, it’s natural to not want to hang out with sinners. Rather than judge the leaders of the day who are grumbling against Jesus who hangs out with sinners, I think we need to identify with these leaders.

I know as a parent, I worried about who my kids hung out with. Heaven forbid they would hang out with a drug dealer or a cheater or a liar or someone mean-spirited. I also remember how offended my kids would be if I even suggested my concerns. “You don’t trust me. Just because I have a friend who uses drugs, doesn’t mean I’m going to use drugs!”

Our leaders in the gospel story have a point. “This fellow welcomes sinners, and eats with them.” Actually, the better translation from the Greek is, “this fellow ***seeks after*** sinners; he even eats with them. Oh my!! These leaders are worried, and it makes sense. And so, Jesus, in the way Jesus does, because of his sympathy and empathy with all, tells two parables.

“Which one of you having a 100 sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness of go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”

The answer to that is, “No one!”

My Uncle Sonny was clear about this and I remember the day he told me about the “circle of life.” The one, that sheep, the one that wandered off…… is sick. Sheep never wander off by themselves; they want to be together. They are easy to herd. Not stiff-necked. The one that leaves is nature’s way of dealing with illness. That sick sheep will become the “sacrificial lamb” for the others as well, as the wolves will be satisfied with the loner, separated from the flock. He is “meant” for the wolves, no matter what.

Jesus, as usual, is upending everything. He is turning on its head the wolf’s banquet on the lone sheep. God seeks us out, not matter what…. The sick, the lonely, the disoriented, the violent, the passive, the fearful, the arrogant…. The stiff-necked! God invites all to dine with Divinity, not because of who we are but because of who God is.

And a woman having silver coins. Never. Women didn’t control money. Never. I remember as a young child in the 60’s listening to my mother complain about not being able to get her own credit card, in her own name. It had to be connected to her husband’s name. The 1960’s. Not that long age.

So a woman having ten silver coins and then losing them and then searching for them would make no sense to the hearers of the parable. And what makes the image even more difficult, is that this image is directly tied to an image of God as a woman. Unheard of. Not only are we introduced to the feminine traits of the Divine: forgiving, merciful, comforting, and generous, we see God as the least- the subordinate, the slightest, the vulnerable, and yet still running the show, seeking us out to find us.

Jesus is giving us such a radical image of God. It’s difficult to get your head wrapped around it.

Often when we lose faith in God, we talk about it in a lot of different ways: I’m just not believing in Jesus the way I am supposed to; or I don’t get the Trinity; or I’m not good enough; or I’m angry with God; or I don’t understand the purpose of suffering, or what is God’s will or why is there evil.

Fair enough. These are real issues. But I think something else is happening. Behind all these concerns, there is something more fundamental.

We have lost the trust and the faith that God is seeking us out, no matter what. Always and relentlessly, no matter what we believe. Always and relentlessly pursuing us…. Whether we are violent against others or ourselves, acting or not acting, believing or not believing, fearing or hiding, or even hating God, God is seeking us out, always.

I was in my late 20’s in seminary and took a rare afternoon off to visit the Bronx Zoo, which was wonderful. A woman, about my age, began screaming at the top of her lungs:

“I have lost my baby. She was right here. Help me find her.”

Many of us ran to her and her empty stroller. “She’s two with a mop of blond curly hair; she’s wearing red.”

We all spread out, searching…. Maybe a few minutes went by…. The longest ever for that mother. But then I heard a voice. “She’s here. I found her. Come here.”

I began to run to the voice, and I could see the mother coming in from my right side, running to her daughter, picking her up and twirling her in the air.

There were tears and laughter….. All of us broke down.

The focus was not on the child or any kind of repentance. (Mind you, sheep and coins cannot repent). Rather it was all about celebrating. Right there on the spot in the Bronx Zoo, we became angels of God, celebrating with tears and laughter, over the finding of this one.

This experience, while I was studying at Seminary, grounded me. God seeks us out in the same way. It doesn’t matter who you are. It’s not about you or your worthiness or your innocence or your violence or your fears.

God is on the hunt, relentlessly. Repenting (which just means to turn toward God) will come in its due time. Right now, it’s all about the finding, the twirling, the dining, the banquet, the joy. God is insistent on a celebration. And it’s this Seeking Love that will always defeat the death blows of violence and sin.

And this seeking out will always be a Homecoming!

Amen.