

Westminster Sermon – “The Tenacity of Grace”

Sunday, September 11, 2022

Scripture: I Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

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In our first scripture reading, I Timothy 1:12-17, Paul (or one of his close followers speaking with Paul’s voice to a later generation) recalls his conversion. The intention is not to share embarrassing and detailed information about his personal life; in fact, few details are given. Rather, Paul wishes to acknowledge his need for forgiveness and express his personal gratitude for the grace, mercy, and patience he has received through Jesus Christ. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

12 I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful and appointed me to his service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. 16 But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. 17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Our gospel reading is found in Luke 15:1-10 and includes the first two of three related parables taught by Jesus. We will read together the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, which are followed by the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This beloved chapter is sometimes referred to as “the gospel within the gospel” because it communicates so well the inclusive nature of God’s mercy and grace at the heart of the good news we proclaim. Let us open our hearts to the Word of God.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3 So Jesus 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 And 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 lost sheep.’ 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 And 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.” Amen.

The title of the meditation: “The Tenacity of Grace”

Text: And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”³ So Jesus told them this parable: Luke 15:2-3

Let us pray: Holy and loving God; thank you for yet another glimpse of who you are. Now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

When I learned that Presbyterian Minister and author, Frederick Buechner died on August 15, I searched our library at home to find his book: *Eyes of the Heart: A Memoir of the Lost and Found*. I had read it earlier and thought it would be a good read during our vacation to Bermuda. In the book, Buechner recalls God search for him through fortuitous events, circumstances, and coincidences on a journey he calls sacred, culminating with being found through the poignant preaching of Fred Craddock at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. In reading his memoirs on the island I had waited 30 years to visit, I was surprised to discover that Bermuda was a place of solace and healing for Buechner when he moved there with his mom at the age of 10 following the tragic suicide of his father. Bermuda was also a place of renewal for me and a reminder of our merciful and searching God in preparation for the year ahead.

As we gather for Homecoming Sunday to begin a new year of learning and searching and welcoming, Jesus’ two short parables of celebration are timely. “Rejoice with me!” the shepherd says to his neighbors as he carries the single lost sheep home on his shoulder. “Rejoice with me!” the woman says to her friends after sweeping her entire house until she finds the single lost coin.

Today members and friends of Westminster rejoice together. We delight in a beginning that feels familiar, and therefore, reassuring. We celebrate the tenacity of God’s grace that has brought us through the challenge of the pandemic. Make no mistake, we recognize there have been losses along the way. Delays in learning and development for our children in the isolation and the missed human expression hid behind the masks. We mourn these losses; yet we rejoice in all that has been found in the midst of loss: renewed values and strengthened commitments, a deeper appreciation for worship and belonging to one another in this faith community.

Today we rejoice in what Jesus is conveying about the tenacity of God’s grace in these simple stories of the lost and found. Neither the shepherd nor the woman has a moment’s hesitation as to what to do; neither forsakes the search until the sheep or coin is found.

This is what God is like, tenaciously seeking out those who have lost their way. Such searching gives value to those being sought. Each person, as a beloved child of God, is not left for lost but is the recipient of divine mercy and grace.

Another truth these stories convey is heaven’s delight in the recovery of the lost. So overcome with joy are the shepherd and the woman who have found what they lost that they call their friends to come for a party. Neither wants to celebrate alone and both are extravagant in the festivities. It is an unusual picture of God throwing a celestial party, which the angels dare not

miss, and a surprising portrayal of God for those who imagine a stern taskmaster or a divine scorekeeper.

The choice of the shepherd and the woman as images of God would have been shocking to all Christ's listeners and offensive to the religious leaders who criticized him. Both are figures from the underside of Jewish society. Even though the shepherd metaphor for Yahweh is beloved and familiar in the Hebrew writings, during this time in Palestinian history shepherds had notorious reputations and were generally avoided as outcasts. The treatment of women as second-class citizens was an accepted cultural phenomenon of the time. A Pharisee would find the use of a woman for a metaphor of God blasphemous.

In answer to the complaint that Jesus had overstepped the boundaries in having table fellowship with sinners, the parables invite the Pharisees and the scribes to join Jesus at that table. They are welcomed to be a part of the searching and the rejoicing and to share in the tenacity of God's grace toward all of us and each of us—even the morally and ritually impure. Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, who preached at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York and was instrumental in God's search for Frederick Buechner, reminds us that these parables are recorded not only for the Pharisees and scribes of the first century, but also for the church throughout the ages precisely because religious people have a tendency toward self-righteousness. This was epitomized forty years ago in the self-identified Christian group the Moral Majority and astonishingly (or maybe not) this condescending attitude is also prevalent among non church goers who don't see a need for church but consider themselves decent and moral folk.

Luke warns us that if we oversimplify our teaching on morality, we do not speak the truth of the gospel. There are not good and bad people that can be neatly compartmentalized in our society. No one is totally moral or totally corrupt. This kind of dichotomy, common for the Pharisees and scribes, lacks an understanding of the complexity of human beings. Like the world in which we live, each of us is both good and bad not either/or.

Jesus warns us that those who consider themselves moral authority figures will likely find God's ubiquitous mercy offensive and thus be excluded from the celebration. May we each have the courage to acknowledge the good and the bad in our own lives, to recognize our own need to be found, and to join in the celebration of a merciful and searching God. Let us join the extravagant and joyful celebration that is possible only because of the tenacity of grace— God's Amazing Grace. Amen.