

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 19  
Year C

Exodus 32:7-14  
Psalm 51:1-11  
1 Timothy 1:12-17  
Luke 15:1-10

What happens when we become impatient with God? What happens when we try to live our lives in our own priorities and not focused on the mission of the Kingdom of God? Our readings today tackle those questions very well.

In the reading from Exodus, Moses is up on Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God. The Israelites were told to wait for his return and turn to Aaron for leadership. However, they wanted a god that would be with them tangibly, meeting their immediate needs, so they ask Aaron to cast a golden calf for them to worship. Worshipping a calf made by human hands right in front of them might seem crazy to us, but not to people of the ancient world. The Israelites were surrounded by people who worshipped carved images. To say that God was not pleased would be a vast understatement. God's reaction is understandable - the Israelites had turned their backs on God very quickly, so why should God care about them anymore. The promise made to Abraham could be fulfilled through Moses.

Moses takes the daring approach of arguing with God. How would Egypt and the rest of the world react if God wiped out the Israelites? He pleads for God's mercy and God has a change of mind. Instead of rejecting and annihilating the people, God forgives them.

We frequently wonder who wrote the psalms and why. This psalm is one in which we have the answer and it fits with this theme of going our own way in spite of God's call. In the Second Book of Samuel, we read the story about David and Bathsheba. In this story, David sees the beauty of Bathsheba and, using his power as king, gets her to come to him. The ensuing one-night stand results in her pregnancy so David must resolve the issue of her husband - which he does. The prophet Nathan then comes to David with a parable in which David is shown the error of his ways. This psalm is David's reaction to Nathan's charge against him.

David has followed the desire of his heart and disobeyed the fundamental laws of God. Not only did he commit adultery, but he committed murder to cover it up. Thus, in his remorse, David seeks God's forgiveness. While the child of that union died, David and Bathsheba went on to have another child, Solomon, who fulfilled God's promise to David.

God's forgiveness is not restricted to the Israelites of the Hebrew Scriptures. Not only did God forgive the Israelites during the Exodus and David following his sinful adventure, God is still at work in the New Testament. Paul presents himself as the chief sinner because of his persecution of the early church. While sex and murder make for better headlines, Paul's guilt was directed against the Body of Christ - the Church. In his letter to Timothy, he admits to being a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. He stacks his guilt right up with David's. But

God's mercy was great enough even for Paul. From being the great persecutor to being the great apostle, God changed Paul. It was through God's grace that Paul was able to reach the hearts and minds of people across the Roman Empire. Like David, Paul had to be confronted by God and brought to his senses.

But why does God do this for flawed people? It has been pointed out that the parable of the lost sheep appears in both the Gospel according to Matthew and here in the Gospel according to Luke. However, in Matthew's take, this parable is aimed at ministers - "It is never the will of the Father that even one of these little ones should be lost." But Luke takes a totally different view of the same parable. Now it not about losing members, but focusing on what is found. Coupled with the parable of the lost coin, this becomes very evident.

The telling of these two parables must have been a little jarring to those who heard Jesus. While the story about the lost sheep uses familiar agricultural themes, it depicts God in the role of a shepherd, one of the most reviled professions of the first century. We think of David and all of the shepherd images of the Hebrew Scriptures as being positive, but shepherds in the first century were dirty, disgusting hired hands. How could God be equated with such a person? But, the second story was worse. Here, God is depicted as a woman. Jesus definitely got their attention.

It is the third parable, one not included in our reading, which brings the entire sequence of all of these lessons together. It is most commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. However, this is a terrible name because it focuses on the wrong character. Therefore, it misses the most important aspect of this entire group of stories.

Beginning with the two readings from the Hebrew Scriptures right through Paul's letter to these parables told by Jesus, we see much rejoicing, even if it is not explicitly stated. Definitely Jesus tells of the great rejoicing in all three parables in this chapter of Luke's Gospel. We are to celebrate God's mercy and forgiveness.

But the real message for us is not from anything we read today. It comes at the end of the third parable - we must make choices. We don't need to hear the story again to remember how it ends. The younger son returns, ready to repent of his ways and work alongside the servants in his father's house. The father welcomes him with open arms and calls of a celebratory feast, while the older brother pouts. Even when the father tells the older son that everything the father has belongs to the older son, that son is not satisfied. Does he respond to his father's invitation to join the celebration? We are not told. Jesus wants each of us to make the choice for ourselves. Will we join in the celebration of someone else's success, or will we stay outside and pout? God's forgiveness is extended to everyone - the sweet child and the notorious sinner. The angels of heaven rejoice equally for both. Will we join in?