

Sermon for Sunday, September 11, 2016

RETURN TO THE LORD

We begin today where we must, remembering the horror and the loss of life on 9/11 fifteen years ago today, and not merely today, but in the very hours we are gathered here for worship. It changed all of our lives, as well as the life of our nation. My heart still goes out to those whose lives were irreparably changed by the loss of loved ones; loved ones who worked in the Towers, loved ones who were First Responders, and loved ones lost later in defense of freedom. Fifteen years has not dulled the images in our heads, which are as vivid now as they ever were.

We lost a lot that day, a lot of innocent people from many nations, a lot of courageous men and women who came to their aid, a lot of our sense of security, and two shining beacons of our economic prowess and accomplishment, the Twin Towers. We also lost our credulity. What would possess anyone to conceive of such a thing, to plan such a thing, and to do such a thing? It defied belief.

Yes, it defied belief. Not belief in God, but in what humankind could do to itself. This is not new, I know. Those of you who endured World War Two remember, and we are all challenged to never forget the Holocaust. But sadly, each generation learns it anew; learns anew what inhumanity we are capable of, an inhumanity that is as old as Cain and Abel, the first brothers.

In our Old Testament reading from Hosea, we are under indictment for our inhumanity. Acting as prosecuting attorney, God brings the charges against us. "There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and there is no knowledge of God in the land." We no longer live in intimate relationship with God, manifesting the qualities of that relationship in our daily affairs.

The evidence of our unfaithfulness is readily apparent. "Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed." There is a complete breakdown of our moral life because we are self-centered and self-interested. In fact so self concerned are we that even nature itself is affected by our hardheartedness. "Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing."

Though the prophet Hosea wrote this indictment centuries upon centuries ago, it still takes our breath away, because we know it could just as easily have been written yesterday. The evidence of our moral failures is on the news every day, and nature indeed mourns for redemption as species after species of wildlife perishes from human indifference. As judgment fell upon the nation of Israel, so judgment falls upon us. We are the indicted.

What to do? Hosea had an answer. He said, "Come, let us return to the Lord." Some people took him very seriously. They returned to the Lord with a faithfulness and loyalty that was truly admirable. They tithed everything they earned to the church, and gave additional gifts to the poor. They prayed several times each day, and led lives of moral perfection. They were the Pharisees.

Unfortunately, the Pharisees became infected by the disease of self-righteousness. They began to pass judgment upon others whom they deemed less faithful than they were. When

we meet them in Luke's gospel, they are indicting Jesus for his willingness to associate himself with sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors and other lowlifes, including foreigners. Ironically, by indicting Jesus, we know they were indicting God. We have come full circle.

So Jesus tells them a couple of parables to invite them to consider the truth about themselves and about God.

The first parable is about a wealthy landowner that lost one of his one hundred sheep. The Pharisees in the crowd readily identified with this landowner. Wealth was considered a sign of God's blessing, and most of them enjoyed the good life of prosperity.

The second parable was about a poor woman who lost one of ten silver coins, probably her life's savings. The outcasts and sinners had no problem identifying with her. So we have a rich landowner and a poor woman each of whom lost something of value. What do they do?

The wealthy landowner drops everything and goes in search of his one sheep that is lost. Frankly, one lost sheep out of a hundred is no big deal. And even if it were, the landowner would send a hired hand out to find it. But to this landowner, that one lost sheep is such a big deal, that he takes a personal interest in finding it. He sounds like a First Responder.

The message is straight-forward. God, despite being the owner of the whole earth and the creator of every living creature in it, takes a personal interest in each of us. In fact, so great is God's concern, that God will leave those who are safe in the fellowship of the community of faith, and seek us out if we go astray. Our concern for a brother or sister wandering away from the fellowship of the church should be no less personal, even if he or she is just one of one-hundred. It won't be, but thank goodness God's concern is so personal. That's what this parable is about.

Now the poor woman who lost her coin drops everything and sweeps the house until she has found it. That one coin, though of little value in the marketplace, represented ten percent of her life's savings. A Pharisee wouldn't have bothered with it. But to the poor woman, that little coin was precious.

One of the characteristics of human society is that we tend to act in accordance with what we determine to be the relative value of things. Not many of us stoop to pick up a penny, but a twenty-dollar bill? Sure!

God does not deal in relative value. The message of this second parable is that God considers even the poorest and most unworthy among us as absolutely precious. If we get lost, falling away from our relationship with the Lord, God will search diligently until we are found. We too should see the Godgiven value in every human being on this earth, be they rich or poor, clean or dirty, churched or unchurched, Christian or Muslim, you name it. We won't, but thank goodness God does. That's what this parable is about.

God pursues us for life in the community of the faithful. God has invested great effort in creating us, and even greater effort through Jesus Christ in acquiring us for the church. If we are lost, God will search diligently for us.

So what happens when God finds us? Are we judged? Are we indicted, convicted, and imprisoned in the fires of hell? By no means, even if we deserve it. We are welcomed home with open arms, and the whole host of heaven celebrates that the lost are found. This is the Good News, because what kept and still keeps a lot of people away from the church is the threat of judgement, of punishment, of chastisement, and of embarrassment. Jesus tells us, that if you come home, if you return to the Lord, despite what you may have done, God will throw you a party. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways says the Lord (Isaiah 55:8)".

What we keep failing to learn is that anger begets anger, hatred begets hatred, and violence begets violence. As a consequence, each generation learns anew what inhumanity we are capable of, an inhumanity that is as old as Cain and Abel, the first brothers. Jesus teaches us that love begets love, that forgiveness begets forgiveness, and compassion begets compassion. "God desires blessing, not curse." That blessing is found when we live in communion with God's Spirit,

enjoying the fellowship of God's love, not only with God, but also with one another. That blessing, is found in one place, and in one place alone: in the church of Jesus Christ.

This worship service is a celebration of God's love, of God's forgiveness, and of God's compassion for us. God has called us together, friends and neighbors, like and unlike, to rejoice that what was once lost is now found. Hosea had it right. When we sense that we have been indicted by God for messing up our lives, or the lives of others, the best thing we can do, is return to the Lord, and invite everyone else to do the same.

PRAYER: Gracious God, remind us again and again that you desire blessing and not curse. And while you do not always care for our actions, you always care for us with a great and merciful love. Encourage us, good God, in whatever way we have wandered away from your presence, to return to you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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Luke 15:110