Sunday, September 15, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown

**Sermon**

**Losing My Religion**

The Gospel of Luke 15:1-10

**INTRODUCTION**

There is no doubt that the harmful impact of climate change on the environment forces us to come face to face with the mistakes and regrets of our past choices. Like Lois Gibbs’ story, once you begin to see the toxic waste bubbling up in your own back yard, you are forced to take responsibility, feel the remorse, sort out what went wrong, commit to change and begin to live differently. This is what *repentance* means. We are awakened to the toxicity infecting us and we take responsibility. To repent is to turn your life in a different direction, clean up the mess and begin to heal. I’m sure Lois would agree, this is not an easy process.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus tells two similar parables about how repentance begins. It always starts when you find yourself undeniably in the land of the lost. You may not even know how you got lost in the first place, but clearly a change in direction has got to be made.

These two parables teach us that repentance does not begin with judgement or self-incrimination or blame, but with tenderness.

Extravagant mercy ***always*** comes first.

**Lovingkindness** is what leads us to make a U-turn and truly change our life for the better.

A reading from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15.

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**SCRIPTURE: Luke 15:1-10**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying,

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them,

‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’

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.

“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? 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.’

Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The Word of God leading us to be a people of God.

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**SERMON**

Last week we spoke about Jeremiah’s metaphor that likens God to a potter and humans as clay. It is God who ultimately shapes the future along this vast cosmic journey and we are the critical substance that is patiently and gracefully shaped and molded into good. In today’s reading, from the Gospel of Luke, we get a glimpse into how the Divine Potter’s technique challenges what is commonly thought to be the primary objective of religious life. We tend to think of religion and spiritual practice as the way ***we*** search for God. But in these two parables Jesus once again flips the script on us. It is ***God*** who searches for us! And when we are found, there is no condemnation for getting lost, no judgment about such thoughtless behavior. There is only exuberant rejoicing in our safe return! How do we to respond to such extravagant mercy and how does that experience change the way we relate to our God and one another?

*God of perfect Lovingkindness, you astound us with these stories of extravagant mercy. Give us insight and understanding. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen*

It is fascinating to me, that the only people Jesus seems to have a serious problem with are the religious leaders! As a religious leader myself, this is quite intimidating. Even though it was the Pharisees and the scribes that were pushing back on Jesus, you can easily replace that with the pastors and deacons. I need to pay close attention to the reality that thieves, cheats, murderers, shady businessmen and promiscuous women are his crowd. It is pretty shocking and even scandalous the way he seems to have a particular distain for the ones who use religion -any religion - as a psychological weapon to enhance their own self-worth and sense of power.

It seems that his intolerance centers on the exclusivity that religion tends to breed; we’re in, you’re out, we know the truth about God, but you people are misguided and lost. For whatever reason it seems that human beings need to create a common enemy to strengthen bonds of belonging. In our hunger and thirst for acceptance, love and worth we build these walls of religious orthodoxy and impose strict rules of acceptable behavior. As history has shown, religion can so easily become the perfect vehicle for self-justification and domination. Ironically, in the end, it is religion itself that can squeeze out the expansiveness of God’s love. Acceptance into the tribe becomes conditional, love transactional and forgiveness must be earned. Theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch said it best. “Religion is the last hiding place from the transformative power of God.” Ideally, religion should liberate people into new social relations with their neighbors,” no matter who they are what they have done or where they come from. Can we actually do that?

The hard truth is that most of our neighbors, and maybe even you, think of the church as a self-proclaimed community of moral excellence and respectability. To belong to a church is transactional and conditional, it is often heavily implied and easily inferred that only when you clean up your act, only when you meet our standard of behavior will you be welcome into this circle. But these two parables reveal a different idea all together: God eagerly seeks out the lost, the broken and the vulnerable. In these parables, Jesus is saying that God will go to great extremes to track down the ones who are lost, the ones who have lost their religion, the ones whose acts aren’t “cleaned up.”

The religion we practice, the one that bears the name of Christ, was not founded by Christ. The Christian religion was developed over hundreds of years by human beings into this huge institution that organizes, codifies, and prescribes behavior. The sticky problem that arises is that when we read the Gospels, we find Jesus consistently opposing institutional boundaries or any attempt what-so-ever to restrict the free flow of grace or limitation of mercy and forgiveness.

This is a consistent theme. He repeatedly disregards the boundaries established by religious society. He heals people on the Sabbath. He speaks with women, makes them heroes in his parables and even touches them. He frequently befriends the wrong kind of people, like those loathsome, heretical Samaritans, the unclean lepers, demoniacs, drunks, and sex workers. Jesus even heals the slave of a Roman soldier! Jesus always pushes us past the narrow confines of religious certainty and self-comforting ritual.

So why is it that the religion that bears Christ’s name is commonly thought of by non-Christians as exclusive, intolerant, judgmental, legalistic, and narrow-minded. Gandhi was once asked, “What is the major stumbling block for the spread of Christianity in India?’ He quickly responded, “Christians.”

The honest truth is that sometimes I’m ashamed to be identified as Christian minister. I totally get what the celebrated author of the Vampire Chronicles and many other best-selling books, Anne Rice did. About 10 years after her well-publicized conversion to Christianity she suddenly posted this on her Facebook page:

“Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being "Christian" or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to "belong" to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else. In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of ...Christ, I quit.[[1]](#footnote-1)”

Pretty dramatic and painfully true.

What Jesus taught so clearly is that God’s greatest desire is for the lost to be found, the broken to be made whole, the boarders torn down, and the harmonic convergence of all people. We don’t need a common enemy to make that happen, we need a God beyond religion.

I’m not against religion, I love the Church and I love our particular denomination, the United Church of Christ. I think we really do need it. We should organize our efforts to care for one another and nurture a community that collectively stands for justice, brokers peace and proclaims our hope in a God who loves unconditionally, forgives freely and never gives up on us no matter how badly we screw up. The danger comes only when we begin to think that our understanding of God and our expression of faith is the singular path of truth that everyone must conform to. To follow in the Way of Jesus is to recognize that we are all, in one way or another, on a road to recovery. Believers, questioners, secular, sceptics, mystics and atheists. We all get lost, we all hurt, need grace, seek forgiveness and desperately want to live in peace with one another. To follow in the Way of Jesus is to know that even when you fail, fall away, behave badly or are caught in a spiral of self-destruction, God will never abandon you, judge you or condemn you. God drops everything else to seek you out, lift you up and tenderly, patiently, eventually, restore your soul. All that is required is your cooperation to be found.

I think the lesson given to us today in the parable of the lost sheep and the found coin is that God is really too busy loving us and seeking us out to ever disapprove of us. There's not a whisper of blame or judgement in this parable. Yes, Jesus talks about repentance, but when you are lost, that’s not criticism. It is critically important to your survival that you go in a different direction. Anyone who is in a recovery program will tell you that.

The truth about God seems to be more about an exuberant, over-the-top, joy that throws a party to celebrate our recovery rather than stern disapproval and disappointment. The truth about God is that we are never defined by the mistakes we have made. This is a joy that is oblivious to any religious restriction, rule or regulation that is intended to make us feel that we will never be holy enough or measure up. This is the joyful celebration of knowing a God beyond religion that has only one thing on her mind; to find the lost and rejoice with abandon. How much greater is this God we have than the God we THINK we have?

This kind of religion and the organizing of this kind of joy-filled, grace drenched church can never think of itself as a closed circle of moral excellence and respectability. This kind of church is a hospital for the wounded, a wide-open circle of joy that revels in what the God of grace and mercy has done, is doing, and will do. Moral excellence is a legitimate goal that we uphold and strive for, but it is most certainly the bi-product of tenderness. A response to extravagant mercy. What comes first is loving-kindness, compassion and a joy filled, boisterous party, on earth as it is in heaven. Sinners, saints and those in-between, the God beyond religion says, “come, *Rejoice with me!”*

1. http://www.annerice.com/Chamber-Christianity.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)