

A Sermon by Mr. Jonathan Pucik
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 8, 2019

Proper 19 Year C RCL: Luke 15:1-10

I'd like to introduce you to Fritz. Fritz is a salt-n-pepper, ten year old, neurotic miniature schnauzer who has an uncanny memory for misplaced toys, and he knows them each by name. For instance, you can say ever so quietly, "Fritz, bring Albert!" And with incredible initiative, Fritz will leap off the couch and retrieve his squirrel toy from some obscure crevice in God-knows-what part of the house. Sometimes, as if out of nowhere and on his own accord, he'll bark incessantly at a bookshelf or a dresser or a closed door. It's in these moments that you know he remembers that he left a toy there--sometimes from months ago--and he can't reach it by himself. It's truly incredible. But every so often, Fritz will either forget where he has left a toy, or more often his human will pick the toy up without his knowledge or permission, and Fritz will become a frantic mess, turning over every pillow and blanket, throwing the rest of his toys all over the place, trying to search for the one who was lost. When he finds it, usually in the box where his human believes toys should go, he puts the toy in his mouth and jaunts around the house with his tail wagging for at least a half hour like his toy is some academy award. If he could pronounce English, I'm sure he would proclaim the same sentiment as today's Gospel parables, "Rejoice with me, for I have found that which was lost."

What's cute in the life of a dog, however, can look straight-up bizarre in the parables given to us by Luke in today's Gospel reading. Perhaps the difficulty hearing them in our time and our place, is that the images found within are lost to us in our culture and economy. In a world of projected profit and loss, who would leave 99 sheep in the wilderness in search of one which was lost? One less of one hundred is no significant loss of assets, but to risk the livelihoods of the 99 in search of the one is to risk gambling away any potential profits. Similarly, the loss of a coin seems to us a small one, and yet when ten coins comprise the whole of one's household savings, the stakes get much higher.

The practices of an agrarian culture and subsistence living do not carry the same impulses of modern-day capitalism. So it may be a surprise to us that the first parable assumes an understanding of the intimate connection between a shepherd and sheep, the kind of loving caregiver that places the recovered animal on his shoulders and carries it home. The shepherd knows that this sheep is not a numbers game; this is a living, breathing, scared, but sacred thing. No doubt the pharisees and scribes in the audience to whom Jesus is speaking would have heard echoes of the Old Testament prophet Ezekial in this little parable. They would have recalled how God, through the prophet Ezekial, reprimanded the “shepherds” of the time, the appointed leaders of Israel who failed to care for the flock of God. Instead, God intervenes, declaring Godself as the shepherd who will now search out, rescue, and care for Israel. This story would have been well-known by the pharisees and scribes who so passionately took their scripture to heart, a practice we could all do well to learn from. It’s ironic however since Jesus gives these parables in direct response to their complaint, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

You see, in their sincere desire to live a life Holy and pleasing to God, it would seem they have allowed the rules to take precedence over table fellowship with Jesus and company. In their grumbling about who should or shouldn’t be able to get in, they seem to have forgotten what Ezekial and these parables in Luke teach us, that God has an obsession with lost things, misfit outcasts, and misplaced sinners wandering in the wilderness, and our Lord rejoices when such things have once again been found and returned to the arms of Love.

In parallel form, God’s frantic and vigilant searching is likened in the following parable to that of a woman turning her house upside-down in search of her coin. Once the woman recovers that which is so very precious to her, she calls on her friends to come and rejoice with her, for that which was lost has now been found. “Just so,” Jesus says, “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

And this is where both parables stump me. Repentance? How is the rescue of a sheep and the recovery of a coin like that of repentance? The sheep would not have been found on its own accord, and the coin couldn't have even gotten lost on its own. This may be just Jesus coming to the limits of his metaphors, but he could've chosen different metaphors. Such a conundrum begs the question, is repentance an act of pure and individual human will? Can we will ourselves to God anymore than a lost coin can will itself to be found? It's an important question to ask as these parables are meant to be in conversation with religious leaders who are insisting on repentance. The scribes and pharisees find it troubling, not that Jesus shows hospitality to do-gooders, but to sinners, while they are still sinners.

The Greek word used here for repentance is *metanoia*, and rather than penance or atonement, it implies a directional shift, a turning toward something. Think of the way leaves turn toward the sun. This repentance is embodied, the turning of a lost sheep in response to the voice of the shepherd, a coin turned by the hand of the woman who has found it. Perhaps it is the holy response of one found, one drawn into the Love of God. "If we but turn to God," said St. Augustine, "that itself is a gift of God."

I think this is wisdom for us. Not to disempower us or to make us feel as if nothing we do matters. Rather, in a world full of merit-based systems and earned incomes, it can be easy to want to apply the same principles to the life of faith, as if God is a boss coming in for your quarterly performance review to evaluate what has and hasn't gone well. Too often the church has internalized these messages, imbuing some circles with so-called catholic guilt and exhausting others with an unquenchable protestant work ethic. If you feel either of those, heed the words of the Christian writer Brennan Manning, "Here is revelation bright as the evening star: Jesus comes for sinners, for those as outcast as tax collectors and for those caught up in squalid choices and failed dreams."

The Gospel of Luke has plenty more to say about our part to play in repentance and of the cost of discipleship. In it, Jesus is somehow both infinitely generous and infinitely demanding. But today, instead of trying to earn your way into the presence of God, perhaps entertain the thought that you are wanted at the table, as you are and not as you think you should be. Allow yourself to be converted as the old saying goes, “I was seized by the power of a great affection.” Listen for the voice of the shepherd, a voice that knows you by name, and remember that there is no place God will not go to find you. As you listen for and turn toward that voice, hear the words of the poet Anis Mojgani,

“Come closer. Know that something softer than us but just as holy planted pieces of himself into our feet that we might one day dance our way back to him. Know that you are almost home. Come just a little bit closer.”