

Pentecost 14, September 15, 2019

(Lk 15:1-10; Ps 51:1-12; Ex 32:7-14; I Tim 1:12-17)

Narrator: A reading from Exodus, describing what happened while Moses was on Mount Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments. God said to Moses,

God: “Go! Get down there! Your people whom you brought up from the land of Egypt have fallen to pieces. In no time at all they’ve turned away from the way I commanded them. They made a golden calf and worshiped it. They’ve sacrificed to it and called it a “god.” In fact, they said it was the god that brought them up from the land of Egypt.”

Narrator: God spoke again to Moses,

God: “Look at these people! What a stubborn, hard-headed people they are! Let me alone now, let my anger rage and burst into flames and burn them up. But you, Moses, *you* shall be the father of a great nation.”

Narrator: Moses tried to calm God down. He said,

Moses: “God, why would you lose your temper with your people? You brought them out of Egypt in a tremendous demonstration of power and strength. Why let the Egyptians say that you had it in for your people, that you brought them out so you could kill them, wipe them right off the face of the earth. Stop your anger. Think twice about bringing evil against your people! Think of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants to whom you gave your word, promising them many children, as many as the stars in the sky, and promising to give this land to their children forever.”

Narrator: And God did think twice. He decided not to do the evil he had threatened against his people.”

This sermon is about forgiveness and second chances. What does it mean that God allowed his mind to be changed by his servant Moses? What does it mean to be loved by God? What does it mean that God's love is always willing to give us another chance?

God loves his chosen people so much, he got over his anger when Moses pleaded with him to “think twice” about destroying them. Of course, Moses used some psychology on God: *What will the Egyptians say if you destroy these people? You'll be a laughing-stock, God! Everyone knows how you delivered your people from slavery in Pharaoh's brickyards—you'll look foolish if you let them perish here in the wilderness!* **Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.**

What does it mean that God is willing to forgive? Paul should know. He bares his soul to Timothy. Do you remember how Paul got his start in the business of Christianity? He was a Zealot, a Pharisee known as *Saul*, who violently opposed the Jews who followed Jesus.

He set out to go to Damascus, the capital of Syria, with a warrant to arrest any who followed “the Way.” He planned to bring them bound to Jerusalem, where they'd stand trial for heresy.

As he and his party were approaching Damascus, Saul was knocked to the ground, blinded by a burning light. He heard a voice saying, **Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?** Stunned, Saul asked, **Who are you, Lord?** The answer must have horrified him: **I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting!**

Can you imagine how he must have felt? Jesus had been hung on a cross, had died and been buried. Everyone knew the rumors that he was somehow alive again—but Saul, for one, didn't believe a word of it. And now that same Jesus was talking to *him* while he was on the warpath against those who followed Jesus!

In his letter to Timothy Paul wrote, **Even though I was once a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. . . Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.** We just sang it: *Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me.*

What does it mean that God hears our confessions of sin and guilt, and forgives, again and again? We heard it in our call to worship from Psalm 51: **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. . . wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. . . .** (sing it with me if you remember it) **Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free spirit.**

In today's gospel Jesus was criticized by the Pharisees and teachers of the law: **This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.** Then Jesus tells them a parable that's absolutely ridiculous:

If you have a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, don't you leave the ninety-nine and go after the lost sheep till you find it? That would be insane! With wolves and bears and human thieves around, you might lose half the flock while you're out searching for one lost sheep!

And yet, he says, **there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who don't need to repent.**

Do you hear the glory of the message today? Do you feel the urgent call of Jesus to turn to God, to draw even closer to God, because of the gracious welcome you'll receive? The message is for *each one of you*, and for *all of you*.

If there's any burden or shame or guilt in your mind or in your past that's keeping you away from God's mercy, all you have to do is turn back to God. Tell him how much you want to love and trust him, and let him draw you closer. You can never out-sin God's love for you! I'll say that again: You can never out-sin God's love for you!

Thanks be to God!