

God is Good
Exodus 32: 1-14
Luke 15: 1-10
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 11, 2016

God is furious. After delivering the Israelites from 400 years of slavery, at the first signs of trouble they turned against God and fashioned a calf from the gold they heisted from Pharaoh's treasury, just before leaving Egypt.

The Golden Calf, a rendition of an Egyptian god was meant to be a, "Gee, we are really sorry for what we did," gesture with the added plea, "Can we come home now and be your slaves again and pretend this Moses thing never happened?"

Hearing this story for the first time, it seems problematic. Is Moses actually talking God down from a tantrum before convincing God to give the Israelites a second chance? Think about that for a moment. God is portrayed as the enraged jilted lover while Moses, a mere mortal, reasons with God until coming to his senses.

But is Moses really the Dr. Phil in this situation? That's how it looks. Even so, we read it wrong if we think Moses calmed God down before doing something rash. That's why it's important to put this story in its proper historical and cultural context. Remember, this event happened almost 4000 years ago and Jewish storytelling, then as now, was rich in tongue in cheek hyperbole.

You see, this story says less about the nature of God and more about the nature of us, revealing our incomplete perception of God when we beg for mercy and forgiveness. Question: Don't we project on God the way we harshly judge others and get nervous because we think God judges us just as harshly?

The same is true when we advocate forgiveness on behalf of someone else. Like a defense attorney pleading our client's case during the penalty phase of the trial, we try to talk the judge down and plead for leniency, but really not expecting any.

So, as you digest this story don't forget God is still God. God, not Moses, knows all and sees all. Only God is above all and beyond all. God didn't need Moses to talk him down. God is quick to mercy but Moses had to go through the emotional and spiritual process of coming to terms with God's justified anger before experiencing God's goodness.

That's the primary point of the story. Even though we don't deserve it, God is good. As Dennis the Menace famously said to his pal Joey while eating cookies on Mrs. Wilson's back stoop, "Mrs. Wilson doesn't bake us cookies because we're good but because she's good!"

That's the takeaway lesson. God forgives, not because we're good but because God's good. Still, it's really easy to project on God our unforgiving hearts and believe God is primed to punish ungrateful sinners, especially after everything God did for us.

This misinterpretation only ends up misinforming our perception of God. In this scenario, God's the cat and you're the mouse. Mercy is occasional and only given when it's in God's interest to still use us to forward the divine plan.

This same mindset poisoned the Pharisees' perception of humanity's relationship with God. They made the mistake of forgetting God's ways are not our ways. Although knowledgeable about God's goodness and grace through the writings of the prophets, like us, they still projected on God their judgmental attitudes and behaviors, not tempered by mercy and grace.

So hedging their bets, the Pharisees feverishly kept their rituals, traditions, rules and regulations thinking only their good works could ever cancel out their sin. At the same time, although aware grace is not something to be earned but a gift to be received, they convinced themselves Israel would be unworthy to receive the Messiah until every Jew followed their example and practiced their strict rules and rituals. Only then could the Messiah appear to usher in the new age.

Thankfully, even though Israel wasn't ready, the Messiah did come when Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up to be the Pharisees arch adversary. They wouldn't listen when Jesus tried to tell them over and over again, God doesn't love us because we're good but because God's good.

That's the point Jesus was making in the Parable of the Lost Sheep. This lost sheep represented the same tax collectors and sinners the Pharisees warned their children about. Through this parable, Jesus invited the Pharisees to reconsider their misconception that God only loves good people like them. The truth is God loves all lost people and leaves the "good" people behind until the lost are restored to the faith community.

That's the primary point of the parable. Even though each sheep of the flock is precious, as our pets are to us, the shepherd still leaves the others behind to go out looking for it.

Have you ever lost a pet? Several years ago, late one night I opened the kitchen door and the cat living in my house sped out into the darkness. I immediately told Susan. Into the wee hours of the morning, with the flashlight in hand, Susan went searching for Daisy without success. The next day I put up 20 or so posters in the neighborhood. No response. Then a friend

told Susan not to worry. Lost cats usually hide somewhere close to home, usually in your backyard. When Susan came home that afternoon, before it got dark she went out again and minutes later came back into the house all excited and happy.

“I found Daisy! She was hiding in the pachysandra near the basement window!”

“Isn’t that wonderful,” I replied, trying to sound enthusiastic.

Immediately, Susan fed Daisy and freshwater before texting everyone the good news. “Our cat was lost but now is found!”

Luke reports after Jesus finished his parable he turned towards the Pharisees and speaking directly to them said, “Just so, I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents over the 99 righteous persons who needs no repentance.” (Luke 15:6)

(By speaking directly at them was Jesus implying the Pharisees were not as righteous as they thought they were?)

Anyway, every time a sinner repents, Jesus said there’s a celebration in heaven. It makes sense. Here on earth, don’t we celebrate when someone lost is found, when someone finally comes home and broken relationships are healed, when harmful habits and addictions are finally overcome by God’s grace?

When Moses intervened and asked God to forgive the Israelites and especially when Jesus intervened on our behalf on the cross, it’s tempting to take their advocacy for granted. The Israelites were forgiven and we are forgiven only because someone without sin allowed himself to be sacrificed for our sins. Only that someone was qualified to take the punishment we deserve to satisfy God’s need for justice.

You see, when God gets angry, as he did when we worship our golden calves, God isn’t just blowing off steam. God gets angry because God loves us. When we break trust with God, we always end up hurting ourselves and others. That’s what angers God. God’s friendship with his children and God’s children’s’ friendship with each other is put in jeopardy. That’s not how it’s supposed to be.

Next time you finally come to your senses and finally turn from your golden, don’t be surprised that God was already looking for you. That’s when you realize even though you chose to be lost, the good Shepherd chose you to be found.

But wouldn’t it be better to count the cost of getting lost before getting lost so you can realize just because God is good doesn’t mean you can’t be good too?

Let us pray.

