

GOD IS GOOD
Exodus 32:1-14
Luke 15:1-10
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 15, 2013

The story of Moses advocating for mercy on behalf of the Jews can be problematic if taken the wrong way.

It appears God is furious. Just after delivering the Jews from 400 years of slavery, at the first sign of trouble, they turned against him by fashioning a calf out of the gold they heisted from Pharaoh's treasury just before their exodus from Egypt.

The calf, a rendition of an Egyptian god, was meant to be a "Gee, we're really sorry for what we did" gesture with the added plea, "Can we come back as your slaves and pretend this Moses thing never happened?" A modern psychologist might diagnose this behavior as a manifestation of the Stockholm Syndrome, hostages forming a surprising bond with their captors.

Hearing this story for the first time, you might draw the conclusion that Moses talked God down from a tantrum and convinced Him to give the Jews a second chance, even though they didn't deserve it. Think about that for a minute. God is depicted as being so angry he isn't thinking straight while Moses, a mere mortal, reasons with God until God changes his mind. Apparently Moses' logic was flawless. He argued (If you destroy the Israelites) "Why shouldn't the Egyptians then say, 'It was with evil intent that God brought them out to kill them in the mountains...(Lord) turn from your fierce wrath...Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel your servants saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of the heavens.'" (Exodus 32:11-13)

Is Moses being the adult in this situation? "Calm down God. You can't destroy us. You'll only end up nixing your grand plan to bless the nations of the earth through us."

That's what this story seems to be saying. Nevertheless, we read it wrong by concluding Moses calmed God down before doing something he'd later regret. So before going any farther let's put this story in its proper historical and cultural context.

Remember this happened almost 4,000 years ago after being told and retold for generations and then written down in the then contemporary style of Jewish storytelling, which is more times than not tongue in cheek but also curiously revealing. Could it be this story says less about the eternal nature of God and more about the human nature of us, that is, how we perceive God when we go to God for mercy and forgiveness?

You see, this story paradoxically reveals not God's, but is more about us projecting on God our struggles and sensations when we intensely pray for forgiveness

and grace, especially when we know God is justified in his anger because the one you're praying for did something terribly wrong.

Knowing there are dire consequences for sinful behavior, like Moses, you intervene on behalf of the other. You remind God, even though punishment is justified the offender is still a child of God with a divine purpose still waiting to be accomplished. So, like a defense attorney, pleading your client's case during the penalty phase of the trial, you ask the Judge for leniency.

This is exactly what Moses was doing, so as we digest this story, don't forget that God, not Moses, is omnipotent and sovereign. God already knows all, sees all, is above all and beyond all. God didn't need Moses to talk him down, he was ready to forgive, but Moses himself had to go through the emotional and spiritual process of coming to terms with God's justified anger and then accepting the surprising implications of God's mercy and goodness. 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, I believe, is the primary point of this story, even when we don't deserve it, God is good. Unfortunately it's easy for this lesson to get lost because the overriding conclusion is usually, "Boy, God had every right to punish those people especially after all he did for them, like sending Moses to liberate them from slavery and then keeping his promise to Abraham by returning them to the Promised Land. It's a good thing God listened to Moses or else those Jews would've been toast."

If this is what you get from this story you should be aware of how it will misinform your perception of God. In your scenario, God is the cat and you're the mouse waiting to be pounced on. Mercy is occasional, judgment continuous. There's no innocence until proven guilty and no pardon if you are. God is the hard to forgive so you better keep his high standards--or else! And yes, there's forgiveness, but only if it's in God's best interest, that is, he can still use you to forward his divine plan. So, you better be good and tow the line.

This same mindset laid the foundation for Phariseeism. Though knowledgeable about God's goodness and grace through their reading about the prophets, they hedged their bets by scrupulously keeping the Law of Moses to avoid God's wrath but also, and this is important, to hasten the arrival of the Messiah. So even though they were aware grace isn't something earned but a gift to be received, they told themselves that not until Israel proved herself worthy by everybody keeping the Law would the Messiah finally come and usher in the new age.

Ironically for them, even though Israel wasn't ready, the Messiah came anyway when Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up to become the Pharisees' arch adversary in faith and practice because unlike them, Jesus realized God doesn't love people because we're good but because God's good.

That's the point Jesus was making in the parables of the Lost Sheep who represent the same tax collectors and sinners the Pharisees warned their children about.

Through this parable Jesus invited the Pharisees to reconsider their narrow misconception that God only loves good people to realizing God even loves lost people and will leave the good people behind until the lost are found, recovered and finally restored to the faith community.

Isn't this what happened in the parable of the Lost Sheep? The shepherd becomes aware one of his sheep had wandered off and got lost. Because each one of his sheep is precious, not only financially but also emotionally, as you are towards your dogs and cats, the shepherd leaves the others behind and goes looking for it.

Have you ever lost a pet? Last fall late one night I opened the kitchen door and the cat who lives in our house sped out into the darkness. I went to tell Susan and into the wee hours of the morning Susan with flashlight in hand went searching for Daisy without success. The next day I put up twenty or so reward posters in the neighborhood. No response. In the meantime the other teachers at Susan's school who also lost cats told Susan not to worry, lost cats usually hide somewhere close to home, usually in your own back yard. When Susan came home that afternoon, before it got dark she went out again and several minutes later came back into the house all excited and happy. "I found Daisy, she was hiding in the pacasandra near the basement window!" "Isn't that wonderful," I replied, trying to sound enthusiastic. Immediately Susan gave the cat food and fresh water and then proceeded to telephone and text everyone with the good news, "Our cat was lost but now is found!"

Luke reports, after Jesus finished the parable he then 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 ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:6)

Imagine that, every time a sinner repents, literally does a 180°, there's a celebration in heaven, which shouldn't sound too far fetched when you consider how we here on earth also celebrate, when someone once lost is found, when someone finally comes home and relationships are restored, when harmful habits and addictions are finally overcome by sanity.

When the Israelites learned Moses intervened on their behalf and asked God to forgive them, it's tempting for us to think it's easy for God to forgive, because after all, God is good. But before we take God's forgiveness for granted let's not forget what was done to secure that forgiveness. Only someOne without sin could qualify to be sacrificed to die for our sins. Only that someOne could take the punishment we deserve. Only someOne was able to satisfy God's need for justice.

You see, when God gets angry, as he did when the Israelites worshipped the Golden Calf, he wasn't just blowing off steam because he was jilted. He wasn't angry because the Israelites seemed to be saying, "OK you brought us out of Egypt, but what

are you doing for us now?" I'd say God was angry because trust was broken by the people he loved and someone innocent would have to pay the price.

We enjoy saying, "God is love." We should also remember God is justice. Justice and love, you can't have one without the other, otherwise there'd be no justice, there'd be no love, there'd be no joy.

So, the next time you finally come to your senses and take the journey home to God your father, don't be too surprised when you find he was waiting for you all along to start the celebration because once you were lost but now you are found. But then, especially remember that Christ, your brother, makes the celebration possible. Maybe then you'll count the cost of getting lost before getting lost and come to realize just because God is good doesn't mean you shouldn't be good too.