

The Mercy of God

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Luke 15:1-10

15:1 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."

We gather on a day of natural joy, today, as we once more **welcome each other** into a church year full of promise and opportunity. And yet it falls in 2016 on a day of remembrance that still stirs pain and grief. Each year on September 11, I for one remember vividly the moments of the morning of September 11, 2001, recalling precisely where I was. How many of you can remember where you were that day?

I started the day in a nursing home in Rochester, New York, with a dying church member. As the first plane hit the World Trade Center, I was with Olga, who was coughing painfully in her final hours. Nobody seemed able to pay attention to a dying woman as they ought—they were distracted by what was happening on the TV.

When the buildings were burning while the second plane hit I was getting a cup of coffee on my way into a clergy bible study on the Colgate Rochester divinity school campus. I learned later in the day that at the same moment, one of our church members late for a meeting, was pulling up in a cab outside the World Trade Center.

Within an hour or two I was on my way into the Islamic Center of Rochester, New York, our local mosque, where the phone had started ringing with threatening and hate-filled phone calls, as the towers collapsed. In the parking lot, I was greeted by police officers assigned to protect the building and its occupants; they wanted to know what my business was. They wanted some ID, and they wanted it quick. I explained that I was the current Vice President of the Rochester Commission on Muslim-Christian Relations.

By two in the afternoon, on September 11, 2001, I was part of a group standing on the steps of the same building: religious leaders, Muslim, Jewish and Christian, holding a local press conference, sharing our common grief and common faith, in the face of atrocity. The statement we read started something like this: *Today we are all Muslims. We are all Jews; we are all Christians.* I felt I was in the very best of company. I am sure that there are some who watched their TV sets that day who thoroughly disagreed.

You and I live in a world that takes an uncommon interest in the company we keep. It is not always a healthy interest. The one we follow, Jesus of Nazareth, caught hell from his fellow religious leaders for hanging out with the wrong folks, indeed for eating at tables that were considered sinful and unholy. Apparently they hadn't heard – or didn't believe—in the mercy of God.

It wasn't just back then. The reaction when we decide to fraternize with those the world sees as sinners is pretty normal for most times and places. I remember being told by a Roman Catholic woman visiting our church years ago that in her childhood she wasn't supposed to visit a Baptist church. She was moved that the local priest and I could exchange pulpits, and even shared communion wine, publicly.

We know what this anger at being in bad company is about. And it isn't about real holiness. It is about fear. Many of us as children were warned by our faith communities and/or our families not to associate with sinners—even though these were supposedly Christian communities, dedicated to following the way of the same Jesus who would eat with anyone.

I guess it takes a long time to get it. Thousands of years. It doesn't have a thing to do with what our faith group is—the tendency to steer clear of supposedly evil influences runs through every faith tradition, including yours and mine. We are judged...by the company we keep.

I am inordinately pleased to serve a church that has a deep desire to welcome everyone to the table. I am so glad to be part of a church that defines itself as inclusive and tries hard to live into that ethic and ethos, collectively. And yet as I listen once more to the story of Jesus in response to the discomfort and accusations of his fellow religious leaders, I find myself sure it isn't enough simply to say welcome on Sunday morning. In a post September 11 world, it surely is not enough.

Not that long ago, I attended an event called "Big Tent Christianity" where quite a number of folk from the fringes of *Small Tent* Christianity, as we know it, all gathered together to try to start hammering out a common agenda. Some of us had extraordinary tattoos! Some came dressed for church in a more conventional manner. One speaker, Shane Claiborne of Philadelphia, had the best darn dreadlocks I have seen in a while. But what made the gathering good wasn't about how we dressed or what our arms looked like. It was who we were. There were gay people and straight people and people who don't want to say. There were young and old. There were people who are in recovery. There were academics and pastors and plenty of lay people. There were evangelicals and mainline Protestants, and Catholics.

In the mix was at least a couple of people who have decided to leave their churches because they are not able to listen any more to the same tired doctrinal formulas, the same narrow approach to salvation, nor tolerate the repressive atmosphere in churches where they don't feel the freedom to explore faith and doubt honestly. They were there searching, searching for a fresh start in their spiritual journeys. And they were struggling.

At my table was one woman who confessed that she had grown up believing in the literal truth of the bible. Now she isn't so sure how to take that. She is drawn to a different way of thinking, of being more fully a follower of Jesus than she learned in her childhood. But what to do with the bible? It has been used like a club on her. But she is scared about the possibility of having to let go of the way she was taught to read it—and still take it to heart.

The world is full of people—maybe you feel like one of them—people who don't fit the classifications of saint or sinner neatly. And our lives are full of people, friends, family, neighbors, who aren't sure what to do with faith or spirituality. And here's the deal. Jesus' parables of the sheep and the lost coin don't talk about inviting people to church. They aren't concerned about formal

religious affiliation. They are told by a man under fire for eating with the wrong company. They talk about a shepherd willing to risk the whole flock for the sake of one messed up confused lost sheep. They talk about a woman hunting high and low, sweeping out the most remote corners of her house, for the sake of one precious coin. Every individual is precious, valuable beyond all reason. And we all can get lost. But God is merciful.

I have been with you for just a bit over two years. I have gotten to know a few of your stories—many more still to learn—yet I know something of the struggles, something of the uncertainties that brought you through the doors of this church that first time. And I know this is a community that has offered support to many over the years. I know how you have taken stands for justice and inclusion that sometimes got you labeled as “THAT church.” And yet as we gather on this first Sunday, in a new Sunday School year, this day of sorrowful remembrance and brand new hopes, I do have a vision for a future even messier than the past.

I have a dream of a Welcome Home Sunday when all kinds of people are invited by their friends or neighbors to take part in this faith community, so many that some of us have to wait to get the ice cream, or find space in a classroom down the hall.

I have a hope for a day when a number of the people in recovery groups in this church say “Yeah, I’m going to take a chance on getting to know the people whose church this is, and wrestle with some of the faith issues I am dealing with.” I see us being thrown wide open, radically open. I see us being intentionally inviting to groups of students. I see us getting to know our neighbors in the apartments and houses that are near this church building. I see small worshiping talking eating together groups multiplying because individuals decide to invite a few friends and acquaintances. I see people who wouldn’t darken the doors of a church three years ago having gatherings in their homes with friends who still wouldn’t—to wrestle with the issues of faith and conscience that are close to the surface for every human being, to share the love we learn from Jesus-- the Jesus who would eat with just about any one.

In my mind’s eye, I see the seeds of who we are, sprouting: I see a crowd of humanity showing up here on Sunday mornings that defies generalizations, and looks like a mix of truckers and undergraduate students and retirees and school teachers and business people and teenagers and maybe a few currently homeless folks thrown in for good measure. People of every race and every religious background. And they are here not because they read about us in the newspaper,

but because someone engaged them someplace, invited them to come home, hauled them into hospitality. They are here because they know this is a safe community in which to disagree, in which to not be sure, in which to argue with God, in which to grieve, in which to find hope once more. They are here, because they have heard that we get it: get it about the mercy of God.

What's your dream? What's your grief? When have you decided to stand on the steps with the wrong—no, I mean all the right—people? And when have you been the lost sheep or the missing coin? Time to pay it forward. Time to spend some time on the outskirts. Time to keep company with some new friends—dangerous ones maybe.

Fifteen years after September 11, 2001, there is a bigger tent we need to raise up.