

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost – Bob Munshaw

Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Ah, my friends. It is election time in Canada, and with all the Democratic debates, we know that it will soon be time to decide whether or not to Keep America Great. I'll leave that up to you, as I get no vote.

Our passages this morning allow us some interesting voting options as well. In v. 15 of our epistle reading, Paul makes the claim that he is the *foremost*, or the chief, of sinners. But was he really? We have some great candidates from our readings today. David was obviously wretched. Psalm 51 is a beautiful and honest prayer asking forgiveness for his terrible sins with Uriah and Bathsheba. Aaron and the Hebrew people spent their time building a golden calf to worship while Moses was meeting with God. And our gospel passage has a number of candidates. There are the tax collectors who cheated pretty much everyone. There are the Pharisees who are so busy trying to be right in their theology and practice, that they forget all about God's love and mercy, and then there are the people who are just called sinners in the passage. Who knows how wretched they are? They might be as bad as you or me!! Ah, yes, there is plenty of room to argue this week over who is the chief of sinners from our passages this morning.

Well, let's start with our gospel passage. To set the context here, this set of stories follows the passage that Judy reflected on last week about the cost of discipleship, and a cryptic statement from Jesus about salt. If it loses its flavor, it is useless and should be thrown away. Perhaps the Pharisees' grumbling at the start of our passage for today was an indication that they were not only unhappy with the sinners Jesus was hanging around with, but also that they knew he was referring to them as the tasteless salt.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells three stories of the lost. There are the lost sheep and the lost coin in our reading for today, and an emphasis on the incredible delight taken when the lost are found and restored. The third story of the lost is that of the lost, or prodigal son, and I remind you that there was incredible joy of the father when the lost son came home ... but frustration and envy from the brother who knew that the lost son did not deserve forgiveness, let alone a Welcome Home party.

In verse 1 and 2, we find Jesus being salty. A week or two ago, I read Psalm 1 to my students, many of whom are freshmen. The psalm is a familiar one: *Blessed is the one who does not walk in the council of the ungodly, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scoffers.* I reminded my students that it is important to surround themselves with quality friends who would focus on academics and their faith and who would not constantly be making foolish decisions that would distract them from their academic goals. It was the kind of thing I tried to tell each of my kids before each of them went off to college. Because we all know from 1 Corinthians 15:33 that *Bad character corrupts good character.*

And then what does Jesus do? He turns that on its head just a bit with his words and actions, and hangs out with sinners. Now, I think it is important to recognize that we are not Jesus, even if we are supposed to be growing in the character of Jesus. Being fully human, Jesus could be weak

emotionally and physically, and he could also be tempted. But, also being fully God, he had knowledge and understanding and a perspective that was and is far beyond us. It was surely a lot safer for him to hang with the tax collectors and sinners without being tempted to sin.

It is clear that each person who is lost, whether they be Christians who are being broken by life, or those who do not follow Christ, matters a great deal to Jesus.

And as we are God's hands and feet, if they are to see God, it will often be as we come alongside them and share God's love through the way we care for them. Hence ... while it is important to heed the advice of the psalmist and of the apostle and have people in our lives who are encouraging us as we live out our Christian faith, we also must be rubbing shoulders with others who are lost and needing to be found.

Our passages today speak a lot about the experience of living in relationship with God and with others. While there are incredibly important places in our lives for seeking truth ... faith must be an experiential journey. Paul likens the spiritual life to a race set before us. Paul Bunyan used the metaphor of the pilgrim and his progress. I have run one marathon, and it was tough. Okay, let's be honest ... it was brutal! There were some extreme highs, and a lot of lows, where my companions, Katie and Rebecca, had to encourage me to keep going. Life obviously has highs and lows. David was the apple of God's eye, a man after God's own heart, the ideal king in so many ways, but sin with Bathsheba and Uriah, followed by his confession and repentance in Psalm 51, remind us of how easy it is for even the strongest to fall.

David's failure was as bad as one could imagine, and among other things, I think it can serve as a cautionary tale for us. He was chosen and anointed for service to God. He seemed to have integrity, and the things of God, the kingdom of God, as his primary focus. But success can lead to complacency. We take our eyes off God, we forget to seek first God's kingdom. After a time, maybe we begin to live as if God does not exist. We begin to rely on our own strength. I think that is a very real problem for North American Christians today, just as it has been for God's people throughout history. David, at least, realized the depth of his brokenness, and we find him begging God not just for forgiveness, but also for wisdom and a clean and restored heart and a renewed spirit.

In our Exodus reading, we find the former slaves out in the wilderness, following Moses on what would become a 40-year journey that could have been traveled in a few weeks. They had seen God work miraculously on numerous occasions, God leading through the cloud by day and the fire by night ... water coming from the stone, manna and quail from heaven. This was the generation that had seen the plagues in Egypt, the terrible night of the Passover, when death descended on the Egyptians, and the dramatic escape across the Sea. Yet on this incredible occasion, when Moses was meeting God on the mountain and receiving the Ten Commandments, the people in the camp convince Aaron to make a golden calf, so that they can have a god they can see, like the other nations around them.

I asked my students why God sent manna daily, and why it only lasted for a day, and I think that they were correct in pointing out that manna that rotted after a day forced the people to trust God

daily for sustenance. We have so much, we are so successful, that we do not sense the need to trust God daily.

My buddy once cautioned me that we can get a sense of our relationship with God by how quickly we experience the conviction and correction of the Holy Spirit when we begin to stray. I think he may be on to something. We are so busy with our own things that we do not even sense that we ought to be seeking the leadership and correction of the Spirit.

It is so easy for any of us to lose focus and get sidetracked.

Though it may be subjective, experience is an essential aspect to our faith. Two months ago, I joined the Facebook group, “FM Shop Talk: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” and oh how it sucked me in. For a few days, it also sucked my time, until I realized that the site was indeed one endless black hole ... engineered to suck the life out of me. The site could officially be called a bickerfest! It is a place where the term heresy and heretic have been thrown around forcefully.

The site has made me think about the relative importance of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. It has also been a catalyst to think about who we are as the church. And what we are called to ... Currently the primary administrator of the site has taken to writing hate-filled diatribes against Muslims.

I have definitely struggled with wanting to have correct theology on all the issues. Certainly, Jesus did a lot of teaching, especially about the nature of the kingdom of God. I am not saying that orthodoxy, or right teaching is not important, but Jesus also spent a lot of time setting an example to his followers ... to us ... through his actions, such as hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus also called his listeners to action. He said, *Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand*. He pointed out that the most important teaching is to love God and to love others. Before he returned to heaven, he charged his followers to go and make disciples.

We can do church pretty well. We can strive for the best theology. But is having the best theology really the primary means to know God? Are we grumbling like the Pharisees because people are not doing their theology the same way I am ... because they are practicing their faith in ways that I find uncomfortable? Am I more worried about that than actually living in loving relationship with God and others? These parables of Jesus demonstrate that what God seems to think is most important is that all have a chance to yes, sure, to repent, but also to experience God’s love and forgiveness and shalom.

Christians are a people transitioning. In Romans, Paul talks about being transformed by the renewing of our minds. He says that we are to present our bodies to God as living sacrifices ... dead to self and alive in the Spirit. In Galatians, he calls his readers to keep in step with what the Holy Spirit is doing, and he notes that as we live by the leading of the Spirit, we will see and we will experience the fruit of the Spirit replacing fruit of the sinful nature in our lives. In our passage for today, Paul writes to Timothy about the transformation that has taken place in his own life. He confesses himself as the foremost sinner, and recognizes that it is the mercy of God and the grace of God (and even the patience of God) that has led to his transformation; this

transformation is not only so that Paul can be saved for eternity and go to heaven ... it is, as he says, so that he can be an example.

I am staring down 50 this week. Nobody is guaranteed a certain quota of years, but any way you look at it, this is the beginning of the back 9 ... or maybe the back 7 for me. I do not harbor hopes that I will be perfect in this life, even if that was the teaching of our Methodist forebears. I know that I will need to confess my sins and brokenness over and again over the rest of my life. As Paul reminds us, I will have to rely on the mercy of God on many occasions on the road ahead, but also like Paul, I want to see growth and maturity. I want to grow in wisdom. I want to love God more, and I want to love others better.

Peter Enns reminds us that faith is what we do, more so than what we know. As we go into a new week, may we have eyes to see and courage to follow as the Spirit leads us to share the love of Jesus with the people with whom we interact this week. And as the community of the King, may we encourage each other in humbly running the race that has been set before us. May God cleanse our hearts anew and put a right spirit within us.