

## A Rejoicing Community – Elise Cranston

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of OUR hearts be acceptable and pleasing in your sight O Lord, our Rock, and our redeemer. Amen

Today's texts smack us with a harsh reality. In all four of these readings this morning there is a bleakness- it appears in images of destruction, in descriptions of our sinfulness or total depravity, in the facing of our own foolishness, and in the loss of something precious. Fortunately some of these texts also bring us the possibility for rejoicing, and remind us that we are a part of a rejoicing community, made possible only by God's grace. I come away from today's readings understanding the joy that is possible in repentance and at the same time grappling with the reality that rejoicing cannot happen without first lamenting. We need ALL four texts this morning to truly understand what it means to be a part of the Christian community. As God's people we are called to experience both lament and joy!

Psalm 14, similar to a large portion of the psalter, is identified as a psalm of lament. Despite the numerous cries to God in the Psalms, it not very often that we read one of these gut wrenching Psalms out loud in church as a part of our Lectionary. As a result, this leads us to ignore the uncomfortable ache that comes with lament. This Sunday we have no such escape: we are hit square in the head with not only a Psalm of lament but also the bleakness found in Jeremiah.

Lament is obvious both in Psalm 14 and Jeremiah 4. In Jeremiah chapters 4-5 we read a series of poems concerning the impending destruction of Jerusalem. These poems by Jeremiah illustrate a harsh reality of doom, terror, and desolation. For example in verse 23 Jeremiah writes "I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light." In this vision, God in his anger has swept everything away; there is no hope, no sign of living creation. The world seems to be as it was before God created light, heavens, or people. We hear God lament his lost children of Israel in verse 22: "For my people are foolish, they don't know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good."

Much of this same language is mirrored in Psalm 14. We read that the "fool" mentioned in Jeremiah and Psalm 14 is the person "who says in their heart there is no God." This fool is living as if she is only accountable to herself for her actions; thus the self becomes the sole reference point for existence, creating a world where we only have to report to ourselves. Like the fool, when we say in our heart there is no God, we commit the fatal error of making the five act play described in Sam Wells "Improvisations" into a one-act play all about us. In a world like this, personal desire trump the needs of community.

Fools do not define God as non-existent but rather shut God out from their lives. To say there is no God is to live as if there is no hope or grace, to live in the bleakness of the fool's existence in the Jeremiah or Psalm texts. And this is cause for lament....in truth we ARE often fools, we cannot save ourselves, and when we make ourselves God we are headed for destruction.

Fortunately, today's lectionary texts do not leave us hopeless in Jeremiah's doom, but bring us to the light and hope of God's mercy in 1 Timothy and Luke 15. Paul's letter to Timothy calls us beyond the laments, and into the reality of God's grace and mercy, grace that is overflowing. Paul explains that he does not receive this mercy based on his character, and goes so far as to call himself the worst of sinners. Paul makes an example of himself as the undeserving recipient of God's mercy, so that he might be an example of the depths of God's grace. Paul reminds us that we cannot live up to God's righteous standard on our own. He defines both our total depravity and that grace is a gift from God, a gift we don't deserve.

Paul continues to explain God's grace in light of Christ, in verse 15, "Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners." Because of this gift, we do not need to live riddled with anxiety that we will not be able to live up to God's righteous standards. No! As we study scripture and go through life we learn that God's righteousness is not a standard we must attain on our own. This grace is a gift! And this gift, like finding a lost coin or lost sheep, is a reason to rejoice!

We rejoice in the gospel passage this morning as this sense of grace pours out of the parables. Through the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin Jesus invites us to discover God's character. The power of the parable is that God reaches us through what we know best: our own everyday experiences.

There is a pattern in these parables: a devastating sense of loss turns into a tremendous celebration of joy. Although we would all perhaps like to claim no attachment to our material things we have likely all experienced the overwhelming emotional swing when we find some beloved item that has been lost.

Recently I lost my glasses. I woke up to find that where I usually lay my glasses on my desk was not occupied with my specs. From there I tore apart my whole room, looking in strange places like kitchen cabinets and sock drawers. I left for class in a huff that I had spent a solid 30 minutes with no discovery of the lost glasses. No matter how much I tried to kick myself out of my foul mood, I knew that until those glasses were back on my face I couldn't rejoice. Fortunately a fresh set of eyes found my glasses that were not in such a strange place after all. I didn't call all my friends to rejoice, but my heart definitely sang out with thankfulness. And this was all for a silly pair of glasses. How much more does God rejoice when one is restored to the community?

At the core of these parables is the faithful and thoughtful care taken by the one who searches for that which is lost. This search, this diligent and hard work, is not something God does grudgingly but joyfully! God wants to be in relationship with us! God goes to the dark places we

hide to search us out. Anne Lamott aptly writes, “I don’t understand the mystery of grace- only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.”

That is why God sent Christ to us, to not leave us in our foolishness and sin. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” God’s grace is only possible because truth reveals our identity as sinners and thus our need for Christ. True repentance must begin with this reality. We are all hopeless fools in need of God’s unmerited grace.

Jesus’ words in the parables of Luke 15:1-10 are clearly for all ears at the table. Jesus is telling this parable just as much for the Pharisees as for the tax collectors and sinners. Often this parable is read or unfolded in a way that only emphasizes the redemption and salvation of the lost, but the “already found” also receive a call to repentance. This is not only a lesson for the lost, but especially for the religious insiders.

God rejoices when the religious insiders, mindful of their own neediness, change their mind about who is in and who is out of God’s community- just as much as God rejoices when a sinner repents. Reading the parable carefully we see that rejoicing doesn’t happen until a community is finally complete. When just one is missing, the whole community is affected, because we need those on the outskirts. The outsiders, in this case the sinners and tax collectors, are an integral part of Christian community. It is not until the lost one is restored to the ninety-nine that true joy is found. The community is not and cannot be complete until there are no more categories such as the “one” outsider and the “ninety-nine” insiders. This parable invites the righteous to rejoice and join the celebration of sinners at God’s table. We need to take this invitation seriously.

In the “New Interpreter’s Bible” Alan Culpepper writes, “Whether one will join the celebration is all-important because it reveals whether one’s relationships are based on merit or mercy. Those who find God’s mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. Thus they exclude themselves from God’s grace.”

In this passage the Pharisees put themselves outside of God’s grace by grumbling at Jesus’ fellowship with sinners. They have no joy or delight that Jesus brings sinners closer to himself and redemption. Grace is only possible because truth exposes our needs. The Pharisees are blind to their need of God’s grace, unaware of their own sins, and unable to rejoice with the lost sheep. In effect, the Pharisees become the fools we read about in Psalm 14 this morning as they ignore their need for God. The “fools say in their heart there is no God.”

Thus all four of our texts tell us that a community cannot rejoice until we recognize our own brokenness. This morning we come to terms with the reality that we are hopeless without God’s grace. But we also rejoice that our story doesn’t stop there. In a little bit as we come to the communion table, we will partake in the broken body of Jesus, we will choose to receive the brokenness of Christ. In that act we are all saying that we are sinners, we need Christ. Here at St. Paul’s we weekly receive the broken body and spilled blood, and somehow Christ’s brokenness brings healing. I love to read the Apostles’ Creed every Sunday, because it so

powerfully declares that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we believe in God. When we can say how much we need God and recognize our propensity to sin, God's grace meets us. So today as we move into communion and recite the Apostle's Creed together we rejoice and we lament, because both are a necessary part of our Christian story.