

Sermon
Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay, California
Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 11, 2022
Luke 15:1-10

“There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea.” That is the hymn that my brothers and sisters and Mary sang at a turnout of the highway through Angeles National Forest, north of Pasadena, for the memorial of my brother Ron’s second wife. I think I might have already told you about the event. Mary doesn’t think so. That’s what you get for having a retired person being your pastor right now. The hymn is a dear favorite of both Mary and me, and could end up being sung at each of our memorial services. Yes, we’ve imagined those times, and the hymns which will be sung there are very important to us. And no, we’re not expecting to hold our memorial services any time soon.

So perhaps to repeat: Ron’s second wife was named Berta. She was from Argentina. She spoke with that wonderfully musical Argentinian Spanish accent. She had previously been married to a doctor, so this was both of their second marriages. Ron would tell us that Berta was to be the heir of a sizable fortune based on a pasta factory down south. He was reading up on how to manage that fortune for the time when it might accrue to them. The only problem was that Berta’s claim was not true. When this reality became clear, or maybe due to other reasons of which I am unaware, Ron left Berta and they became separated. At some time later, Ron came by to check up on Berta. She did not respond to his knocks. He was able to enter the apartment, and she was lying on the bed, her arm hanging off the edge. She had taken her own life.

I found this out when Ron phoned me, one of the few times ever,(to be honest, I don’t phone him too much either), to tell me what happened, and to ask for my assistance in dealing

with Berta's death, probably in equal measure because I was his next younger brother and because I was a pastor. I was both deeply grieved, and wanting to help.

A few days later, the small group of us drove up the mountain highway, found a turnoff that Ron and Berta had visited before, and hiked some yards up this defile, found a soft spot to gather, and sat together on the ground, with a view of the opposite range of mountains. We talked about Berta and her difficult life and hard death, sensing its profound tragedy. Both Mary and I agreed on this hymn because it seemed best to fit the occasion. It would have been easy to be judgmental of the whole situation, to question it. But our minds went to Jesus, to God's perspective of it all, to our own understandings of the Trinity. And we sang,

There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea;
 there's a kindness in God's justice which is more than liberty
 There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heav'n.
 There is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment giv'n.

It shouldn't be a surprise to us that Luke writes, "the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus." They must have come because they were hearing the words of eternal life. And Jesus welcomed them with open arms. The righteous folks said that this wasn't a good look. Especially the commendable Puritans, the ones called the Pharisees. They were the successful religious people, the ones Jesus might have had in mind when he said there were those who didn't need to repent, most likely tongue in cheek. These folks had a serious concern that Jesus was putting all of his good works, his healing, his teaching, at risk by consorting with the wrong kind of people. Their proper way of holy life was in adherence to God's commandments, avoiding immoral behavior, and not being contaminated by those who went the other way.

The tax collectors were singled out because they made their livings on the backs of the people. We're not talking IRS here. The tax collectors were working for the Romans, enforcing a crippling tax code. They were using their exceptional talents of literacy and numeracy to

burden people. They were absolutely *personas no grata*. The other sinners, we can imagine about them.

But the rule was, clean up your act, or at least appear to be doing so, and then you were welcome into religious circles, to worship, to social gatherings, to intimate dinners. But Jesus was different about rules. He did not require conformity to the commandments in order to welcome them into fellowship. It was John the Baptist who had preached repentance. Jesus preached the coming of God's realm, God's kingdom. In a way, as the apostles Paul and Peter would later realize, that all distinctions would fall, including the one between the pure and the impure. And the righteous religious folks were not pleased with Peter or Paul either.

So Jesus told a parable, as he often did when things got hot. Actually three parables, two of which appear in today's gospel passage. About lost things. Today, the lost sheep and the lost coin. "Which one of you," he says, "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 they find it." Well, his listeners might have stopped him right there if they had had the nerve to say, "Wait! What? Which one of us would do this? Leave ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness while we go on what might be a fruitless mission to find the sheep who had wandered off, leaving the others to the potential ravages of wolves or wandering off themselves? Jesus, that is not how we do these things. A good shepherd would write off the loss, perhaps receive a scolding from the owners of the flock, perhaps lose their job as a result. But leave the flock to find the missing one? Which one of us? None of us, if, God forbid, we were unfortunate enough to be a sheep-herd in the first place."

But Jesus came to teach all of us about mercy. As he said, God desires mercy, instead of sacrifice. Inclusion instead of exclusion. In the series *The Chosen*, Jesus shows up at the end of

the first episode, to Mary Magdalene, in the depth of her despair, about to drink herself into oblivion, placing his hand gently on hers as she reaches for the poured drink, saying, “That’s not for you.” When she bolts out the door, he follows her. She has gone by the name Lilith in her current life, and that is how everybody knew her. But Jesus spoke just one word, her given name, “Mary.” And Mary turned around, and saw Jesus, was touched at her core, and was healed.

Isn’t this funny? Well, it is quite moving. But funny in the sense that we spend our time trying to follow Jesus, and here he is following Mary, and by extension, us! What other moral or lesson can we discern from these parables about lost things except that it is not us who pursues God, but God who pursues us, whether we are lost or found? God is eager to be in our lives. What other way is there to know God except that God allows it, chooses to be revealed to us. By means of Jesus, and also through the Holy Spirit, through others, through the revelation of creation.

Paul writes in Romans, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revelation of the children of God.” Some say that creation waits for who will be revealed as God’s children. But that’s backward. Creation knows who we are. Creation is waiting for the revelation of who we truly are to come to our own minds. For us to see, to realize that we are God’s children, that we are not alone, that we are being pursued by the Divine. That all our efforts to prove or justify ourselves are nothing. That WE ALREADY are what God wants, not anything that we present for evidence of our worthiness.

There is welcome for the sinner, and the promised grace made good;
 there is mercy with the Savior; there is healing in his blood.
 There is grace enough for thousands of new worlds as great as this;
 there is room for fresh creations in that upper home of bliss.

The writer of the hymn, Frederick W. Faber, died in 1863, just as the Civil War was getting started. He didn't know all about exo-planets being discovered in our time. But he knew, somehow, of God's unlimited mercy and grace, and imagined that there COULD be more worlds, and they wouldn't tax any reserve of love in the universe.

For the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
But we make this love too narrow by false limits of our own;
and we magnify its strictness with a zeal God will not own.

Nothing to add here.

'Tis not all we owe to Jesus; it is something more than all:
greater good because of evil, larger mercy through the fall.
Make our love, O God, more faithful; let us take you at your word,
and our lives will be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.

Nor anything here either.

Please, if any of you are around for either of our deaths, and we are here when it happens, please be sure to remember that it would be our wish and pleasure, that among any other hymns that we love and request, you may cut some for length, but not this one. It is, for us, a great reminder of who we are, whose we are, why we are, why we are able to love. Amen.

Rev. Brian Stein-Webber

September 10, 2022