

Sunday, September 16, 2007 Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 Psalm 51:1-11
Sixteen Pentecost Year C 1 Timothy 1:12-17 Luke 15:1-10
Christ Church, St. Michaels Maryland The Reverend Abigail Crozier Nestlehutt

About three months after I was ordained the rector with whom I worked decided that we would do a preaching series for Lent on the topic of sin. While it sounded like a reasonable idea for the season it was not something that I wanted to do and I told him so. Still, we went ahead and I participated and did my best to preach sermons that addressed rather than avoided sin. Well, that rector is about to retire now—indeed I will travel to Cape Cod for his farewell service later this month. And I find that my aversion to the topic has lessened for a variety of reasons perhaps chief among them the fact that I am more comfortable in my knowledge of God’s unshakeable love than I have been in the past. As a younger, more rebellious person I needed to reason that sin paled in comparison to God’s forgiveness and so, why even talk about sin at all? All I wanted to think about was how God’s enormous love would erase any wrong that I may have done—would take away my sins.

It seems that with each passing year I become more willing to dwell in the gray areas of life rather than existing only in right or wrong. I am more willing than ever to accept the reality of my faults and *also* to believe in a God who loves unconditionally. I have less need to wish away sin than I have had in the past and I think that it is because I am stronger in my faith. I am more confident in my relationship with God—the kind of God who would leave ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to find one that is lost. And I have come to more fully accept the fact that my responsibility is to live the way in which God calls me to live—as closely as I am able. If I understand my sin as having to do with those moments when I fail to follow God (when I get lost, if you will) rather than simply as breaking some sort of rule in a rule book then I can begin to embrace the notion that sin is not some sort of arbitrary marker of whether or not I am a good person but rather a part of my life as I seek to live as a person of faith. Instead of worrying about all the mistakes I have made or might make in the future I can focus my attention on decisions that draw me closer to God.

The lessons assigned for today invite us to consider sin. First, the prophet Jeremiah speaks in judgment against Judah and Jerusalem for doing evil. Then, in First Timothy we encounter the familiar statement “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.” And then there is the reading from Gospel According to Luke with those comforting parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin.

As is often the case, in the gospel lesson this morning we hear of Jesus associating with tax collectors and sinners and as usual, this raises some concern. We tend to see this sort of behavior as very inclusive of Jesus and very small-minded of whomever complains. But, I wonder, how many of us would want our children or grandchildren hanging out with people who tend to get into trouble? How many of us seek the company of those who are outcast? Typical of Jesus, here he is stretching those around him and also us.

We do not like to think of ourselves as sinners and we do not like to be with people who remind us of our frailties.

To those who complain about his actions Jesus tells two parables—basically challenging his listeners—who would not search for one lost sheep or scour the house for one lost coin? As if it is the most obvious thing to do. And then, there is the best part—rejoicing. “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Not only does God welcome back the sinner but God rejoices. God adores us no matter what. There is no giving up on us no matter what the risk and no matter how long it takes. That is what Jesus is telling us this morning and that is why Jesus welcomes all people: tax collectors and sinners—in order to bring them to relationship with God.

You see, we must remember, as my seminary professors reminded me: the opposite of sin is not goodness or virtue but rather faith. Paul’s Letter to the Romans says: “for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Romans 14:23b Sin is less about what I have done wrong and more about my relationship with God. And so I need to be making decisions and ordering my life in a way that is consistent with my beliefs.

I am fairly sure that despite my best efforts I will continue to go astray from time to time—we all will. Happily, God will continue to seek us out and even to rejoice at finding us. Yes, you and I cause God to rejoice—imagine that. What we need to do is to focus on our faith.