

September 11, 2016
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jason Haddox

My friend Rob is a priest in Oregon, who travels around the country teaching wonderful workshops on how to be an effective leader in church and culture in our time. And Rob talks about “the crazy gods” we make for ourselves. We’re incredibly good at making our own gods, you know.

Maybe not a golden calf, as the Israelites created in their wandering in the wilderness. Or a tree or a pole as an object of worship, as we hear Jeremiah taking them to task for, this morning in the first reading. But there’s a reason that the first two commandments of the Big Ten are “God is God, and no one (no thing) else is; and, don’t be making any thing that you imagine will be “god” for you.” Because we are impossibly skillful, we human beings, at taking some thing or person or idea or system of thought, painting it gold and putting it up on a pedestal and declaring “Here is our god, our salvation, our protection, our deliverance.”

And depending on who we are, and where we’re coming from, we create crazy, vicious, mean notions of who and what God is. Mostly we take our own anger and criticism and judgment and imagine that that’s who God is.

“You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out God hates all the same people you do.” -Anne Lamott (Bird by Bird)

We do this ourselves; we see it in others. When religion becomes an excuse or rationale to hate or destroy or even speak degradingly of other people, it has ceased to be life-giving to the one who practices it in such a form. We remember on this very day, fifteen years gone, when religious language was used as a veil, an excuse, to justify a series of acts that still shock and hurt and resound through the world.

Today in the passages from the letter to Timothy, and the gospel of Luke, we hear Paul of Tarsus and Jesus of Nazareth both confronting their own faith tradition to say something about that tendency.

Paul describes himself as “the foremost of sinners...a blasphemer, a persecutor... a man of violence.” All of which is true—he makes no attempt to pretend otherwise. And yet, he says, and yet, that is not all. The story does not end with Saul on the road to Damascus, laying by the roadside in the dust, blind and frightened. God does not wreak havoc on him, but instead brings him into a new awareness. “I once was lost, but now am found/Was blind, but now I see.” Even when he was all of those things, even then God was reaching out for him. “For all that” he says “I received mercy” and grace, and faith and love. All from God, displayed and shared in the life and person of Jesus, whom Paul now calls the giver of eternal life. The life of eternity, now in this world, and in the age that is yet to come.

Jesus himself is confronted with a dilemma this morning. Note the first sentence: “All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying ‘This fellow receives sinners, and eats with them!’”

That phrase “This fellow receives sinners and eats with them” is engraved in big gold letters on the altar table of St. Gregory Nyssen Episcopal Church in San Francisco. It is their reminder, Sunday by Sunday, that not only Jesus, but Jesus’ followers, got in trouble with the religious establishment of their own day for being far too willing to spend time and hang out with “the wrong kind of people.” The fact that this story appears in the Gospels at all, much less as a recurrent theme, is remarkable. It tells us that even a generation or two after Jesus’ earthly ministry, his followers were still at it somehow. Still eating with “them people”; still crossing boundaries between “worthy” and “unworthy”, deserving and undeserving. Still discovering God on the wrong side of town.

Jesus does not respond to his critics with arguments. Instead, as he so often does, he tells a story. Three stories, in fact. We get to hear two of them this morning. “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost...”

Stop a minute. Think about what he's said. "Leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one." NO ONE is going to do that, Jesus. Take off after one, and let the 99 go wandering away themselves? Don't be ridiculous!

There's something very strange about this story. With those words "in the wilderness" we are in rough, unsecure territory. A shepherd who would treat the 99 in such a way, in order to go after the one, would be out on his ear as soon as the owner of the flock heard of it.

And if that wasn't bizarre enough, Jesus then tells the story of a woman who loses a single silver coin (valuable in itself, to be sure), tears the house apart looking for it, and then throws a party to celebrate finding it that probably costs her the other nine coins to put on!

Both of these stories end with a tidy little tag about "repentance." The Greek word translated "repentance" is *metanoia*, which means something like "Turn around, you're going the wrong way. Change your direction, change your mind." That's another sermon for another day.

But here's the further bit of bizarreness. A sheep cannot 'repent' in any significant way, because sheep are not self-aware. The shepherd's job is to keep them out of trouble, because they're lousy at getting themselves out of trouble once they're in it. And this shepherd, who is apparently not the valedictorian of the Jerusalem Shepherd Training Program, runs off and abandons 99% of his livelihood to chase after the one.

A coin cannot 'repent' in any way at all. It cannot suddenly change its mind and pop up and roll back out from under the bed. For the coin to be found, the coin hunter has to turn on all the lights and pull all the furniture out from the walls and take a broom and sweep through all the dust bunnies under the couch and behind the cabinet in the hallway until—At last!—there it is.

These stories of Jesus, despite an editor's attempt to make them about "repentance" are really about God. God chasing after the one in spite of the ninety-nine; God tearing the house apart in search of the one and celebrating, even at the expense of the

other nine. The story we don't hear this morning, the third in the set, is about God refusing to give up on the one who was lost and wandering, even though the older brother gets mad and refuses to come to the celebration when the lost one comes home. You may know that story as "the Prodigal Son." I call it "The Prodigal Daddy."

A quote from my friend Robert Solon to conclude: "...God will never forsake any of us. We of course are free to do so, and there are patterns and habits of living that will also contribute to that. But the moment we even think about considering to turn back to God, God is...already running to meet us. And so that turns upside down our living rightly: we do so not to earn God's love because that is sure and certain. Rather we do so in grateful response and proclamation of that very love. We love, cf. 1 John 4, because God first loves us."

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God first loves us. All we can do is say yes, and thank you, and seek to carry and share that love with the rest of the world and those around us.

God loves us first, and last, and at every moment in between, without condition or limit. Jesus on the cross stretches out his arms to embrace and hold fast all the creation, all that is and has been and shall be, and each one of us, just as we are, along with it. The risen Christ opens his arms to the confused, frightened, guilt-stricken disciples in the upper room on Easter day, and says "Peace be with you." It is Abba—Daddy—whom Jesus proclaims, and to whom he returns, and from whom the Holy Spirit, Ruach, the Breath of God comes forth to renew and lead and comfort and strengthen us, even this day, in this place.

This is our God, in whose love we are renewed every day, with every breath, moment by moment. The crazy, angry, fearful godlings of our own creation simply fall into dust before this God, to whom be glory and praise and worship, this day and for ever.