

“Restorative Promise”
Twenty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 11, 2016
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 Psalm 14 Luke 15:1-10
First Presbyterian Church of Sandpoint, Idaho
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In his book, Integral Christianity, The Spirit’s Call to Evolve, Paul Smith talks about various stages of spiritual development that individuals and even entire cultures must grow through as they learn through experience the very broad, inclusive, expansive love of God. Lower stages such as tribal religion and warrior faith view God as judging and condemning, fierce with anger and blessing those who merit good behavior while cursing those who do evil. Jeremiah’s prophetic message is written in such a style, and much of the Old Testament reflects these lower stages with fear-based religion and the desire to appease the wrath of God which often seems unrelenting.

Paul Smith wrote this book on the seventh anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Speaking of that Warrior Church stage of development, he says, “It was warrior consciousness that conceived, planned, and launched those attacks. We must expose terrorism for what it is and protect ourselves against it. But in doing so we must operate from a much higher level than the terrorists. The warrior stage of culture is about who is the most powerful. Aggression, impulsive behavior, pleasure, and violence rule. We fight to be in control. The world is like a jungle where the tough win and the weak lose. At this station in life...there is an absolute authority that is outside of me such as a parent, a teacher, a boss, a minister, or a God who makes the rules that I follow without question. “My teacher says...” “The Bible says...” “The government says...” The world is black and white, good or evil, with no need to reflect on the nuances in between.... Fight aggressively without any guilt. After all, you are the center of the world.” People at this stage proudly call themselves “fundamentalists.” Following rules, purity codes, and angrily excluding people who don’t measure up or disagree with their beliefs is shown in stories like the one from Luke where the scribes and the Pharisees were grumbling because Jesus was welcoming tax collectors and sinners, going so far as eating with them, which was a way of honoring God’s presence among them.

Jesus in these parables is stretching us to higher levels. The Bible in general shows the evolution of faith development and we see that this morning. God’s goodness is there all along, but the reports and descriptions just get more and more expansive with each passing page. In Jeremiah we hear about an angry God but even in the midst of the prophet warning the people, we see a shining phrase. “The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.” Among the doom and gloom there is a restorative promise, “I will not make a full end.” There is more to come, better than before. And in Psalm 14, even though the LORD looks down from heaven on humankind, and note the external nature of God at this stage, it seems that there is no one who does good. Yet God is in the company of the righteous and a refuge for the poor. “When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.” Words of promise that shimmer with visions of hope.

Luke 15:1-10 shares two of three stories involving a search for something lost, and great joy when it's found. In story-telling, Jesus challenges the scribes and Pharisees to expand their understanding of their image of God. God as a shepherd who searches for one lost sheep. God as a woman who sweeps by lamplight for a lost silver coin. These characters in themselves would stretch their thinking. God as a shepherd? Society's bottom shelf? God as a poor woman? And yet these male and female images show a searching, relentless God seeking out the most vulnerable and least valuable so they may be included, and when they are found the shepherd and the woman rejoice, and call everyone else to rejoice with them. They want to have a party and celebrate. God's angels share in the joy as heaven and earth become one, as one sinner repents.

God is all about relationship, and God's restorative promises help us journey through those times when we experience loss, feel like there's no light, suffer at the hands of others who go astray, and this joy is both a result of and the cause of deliverance because joy is God's love experienced in action.

These passages represent an evolution of spiritual growth, and the Bible illustrates this as the covenant relationship between God and humanity grows through the generations. Jesus introduces new levels of faith experience which are pivotal invitations to relationship and gratitude, based on God's restorative promises.

Last week the Pope gave an address in a worship service. Although the text he was preaching from was about a conversation between John the Baptizer, who was in prison, and Jesus, some of the themes are helpful for us today in light of stages of faith and restorative promises. John's Warrior Stage preaching describes a Messiah "with strong language, as a judge that would finally establish the Kingdom of God and purify His people, rewarding the good and punishing the evil." But "Jesus has begun His public mission with a different style, [and] John suffers because he finds himself in twofold darkness: in the darkness of the prison and of a cell, and in the darkness of the heart. He does not understand Jesus' style and wants to know if [Jesus] is in fact the Messiah, or if he must wait for another. He just cannot see it. A lower stage of faith just cannot see a higher stage and how it fits.

"And Jesus...answers that He is the concrete instrument of the mercy of the Father, who goes out to all bringing consolation and salvation, and in this way manifests the judgment of God. The blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf recover their dignity and are no longer excluded because of their illness, the dead live again while the Good News is proclaimed to the poor."

As Pope Francis reflects on this, he says, "The message the Church receives from this account of Christ's life is very clear. God did not send His Son into the world to punish sinners or to annihilate evildoers. Instead, [God] addressed to them an invitation to conversion so that, seeing the signs of divine goodness, they could rediscover the way of return."

But even as Jesus invites people into the deep fullness of a loving relationship with God, those Pharisees and scribes cling to their image of God. (Quoting David Lose). "They don't realize that God is primarily about love, rather than rules, and therefore

about joy, rather than anger or fear or impatience, or all the other things it's easy to imagine God is about."

As one preaching commentator, David Lose, reflects on this he asks, "So what would it be like, I wonder, if we decided to invite our congregations to be places about joy, all about joy, anytime one of God's children discovers the abundant life God hopes for all of us? I think it would be pretty cool.

When we focus on the lostness, for lack of a better word, we miss the joyful character of these stories and of God. But we also might miss that in both stories, there's far less attention on what's been lost than on the one who is searching. I mean, these stories aren't about a lost sheep or coin, not really. They're about a shepherd who risks everything to go look, and about a woman who sweeps all night long to find. These stories are about a God who will always go looking for God's lost children.

(David Lose, In the Meantime blog, http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-17-c-joy/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+davidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29).

Are we like the scribes, more interested in grumbling about people who are different than us? Are we like the Pharisees, focused on our own interpretations of who God considers worthy? Do we continually judge through dualistic religion that categorizes good and bad, seeking to live life on our own terms yet without knowing it actually constructing barriers to God's awesome revelations?

Jesus shows us a God who isn't interested in barriers, who is more interested in the joy of finding and healing and restoring. Jesus tells us and shows us God's mercy in action.

To close, let us ask for the gift of a great faith so that we too become signs and instruments of mercy.

Shall we pray?

Holy God, thank you for your loving Presence and the Holy Spirit calling us to evolve from aggression, anger, and exclusion, deeper into an experience of joy in your Presence. Thank you for these stories from scripture that proclaim your restorative promises in Christ. As we hear Jesus share examples of a shepherd, someone who stands at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder, and of a woman with only ten silver coins to her name, we realize that these aren't just metaphors, but reminders, that you often work through the most unlikely, ordinary people to do the extraordinary work of helping to find someone. They are reminders that you are all about joy through relationship. Lead us, as your people, to be a congregation rooted in this joy, all about joy, to help your children discover the abundant life you hope for all of us. Remove the barriers we put up and help us examine the images of you we assume to be true. Give us the gift of great faith so that we too become signs and instruments of mercy, even as we live in gratitude for your goodness and restorative promises that surround us each day. Amen.

(much of this prayer based on David Lose's commentary).