

September 12, 2010

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19c)

Luke 15:1-10

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Rejoice Over One Who Repents

"There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who have no need of repentance."

That sentiment has been the basis for much traditional Christian mission from the Anglo Catholic priest who goes into the slums in search of lost women, to the eager young man or woman who set off to some remote land to bring the gospel to the natives that they too might repent and be saved. One difference between many of those ministries of old and the ministries we celebrate today is that we know that every one of us is still lost in some way or broken or still in need of God's grace as we look for righteousness or right relationship in our lives and in the world.

We certainly celebrate any sinner who repents, but we also assume that even those accounted 'righteous' are works in process. What we do not do is assume that the 'righteous' are those within the fold of the church and the 'lost' are those who have yet to join because they are sinners in need of repentance. Righteousness is not a status conferred in baptism. It is a goal, a hope, a dream and a vision of lions lying down with lambs. We will only know fully that ultimate sense of right relationship when the presence of God is made manifest as peace passing understanding and justice for all.

Our parish leadership, our vestry, has just returned from time of reflection on what it means for us to say that we are a worshipping community, growing in Christian Faith through engaging God and neighbor. We had many conversations of significance but none more than when we asked what it is to grow in faith, when we have had to really and truly put our trust in God's grace and love, and how we can recognize growth in our ability to trust the God revealed in Scripture. For most of us those times were most manifest when we made a hard decision about doing the right thing without knowing how it would work out and whether it would work out for the best or not. A surprise and, on the face of it, inconvenient pregnancy; a decision to forgo a promotion in order not to disrupt the stability of a child; a painful decision to end a marriage; a boss telling an employee something they don't want to hear; accepting a buyout package without knowing that there is another job on the horizon; pulling children out of a school they love in times of economic hardship. These are the kind of times when we can choose to put our trust in God and when, according to the testimony of our leadership, God proves trustworthy. God does not spare us from pain, does not swoop on to intervene and fix things for us -- does not make everything alright.

What God does do is rejoice when we turn toward what really and truly matters in life. Placing our trust in God helped us to live with less anxiety and less fear of the unknown. When we trust God we find ourselves more able to be comfortable in our own skin and more able to both claim and make manifest in our lives the promise of the Gospel. What is more every time we remember what is of true and ultimate worth, --what really matters in life--every time we trust, trust becomes easier, and more natural for us and we recognize that we have grown in Faith.

The word that means 'repentance' is *metanoia* and it has the force of 'turning'. When we repent, we turn toward what really matters. We turn toward the ground and source of our being, the love that made us for love. When the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling about the fact that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them, Jesus took some examples from the economics of the world to signal the intensity of God's desire that every one of us learn to trust what I, in the end, the only trustworthy thing in life and that is God's love. The shepherd who lost a sheep might well have had to repay the value of that animal and it would be month's worth of wages. The sheep was so valuable to that shepherd and its loss so significant that it really mattered little whether he lost one or a hundred. Either way he had had it. Oh the relief and the joy and the 'alls right with the world' feeling when he found that sheep and knew that he would keep his livelihood. There is more joy in heaven when any one of us begins to trust what really matters for life. Or how about the woman who lost a coin? It is likely that Jesus was imagining a young woman of marriageable age who wore her dowry as a headband of coins -- a sort of debutante of the ancient world. A lost coin from that headband would be visible, probably shaming, and might well threaten her marriageable status. In a world where a woman's best bet in life was to be married a single coin really mattered. Oh the relief when that coin is found, the giddiness of restored possibility for life. How much more is the rejoicing in heaven when any one of us turns toward what really matters and places our trust in God for life?

As much as learning to trust God casts out fear, so it also allows us to approach each other with proper humility. We are not 'the saved' going after 'the lost'. We are not 'the righteous' going after 'the sinners' of this world. We are fellow travelers who have begun to taste the first fruits of the promise that love really is stronger than death. Every one of the ministries that we celebrate today bears within it the possibility of our growing in faith through engaging God and neighbor. First we worship, orienting ourselves or turning again toward what really matters and then in many and varied ways we encounter one another sharing stories in a GIFT group or the joys and sorrows of a lifetime in a woman's chapter. And we also move alongside people whose lives are testimony to the grace of God in children who flourish with a new set of good looking clothes or men who have been homeless addicts and who by grace have found strength to overcome addiction. We encounter the working poor through the Midtown Assistance Center who live much closer to the edge than is comfortable for any of us. And we hear stories of unbelievable courage among the refugees whom we seek to befriend. These ministries are not the *noblesse oblige* of Lord and Lady

Bountiful. They are manifestations and consequences of the gospel. They hold within them possibilities for all of us to grow in faith through engaging each other, sharing stories and turning, turning, turning to the Love who made us for Love. This is a worthy celebration this day for “truly I tell you there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray, giving thanks for the grace to trust God for life.