

Fourteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C)  
Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10  
September 14-15, 2019  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Kids who are old enough to babysit younger brothers or sisters: you've probably heard this once or twice from your parents when they've come home from being out and they find the kitchen or playroom or some other corner of your home in less than great shape: "What's **happened** here??" Or maybe they come home earlier than expected and catch you doing something you shouldn't be: "What's going on here??"

You've heard the saying, "When the cat's away, the mice will play." That's nothing new. In our first lesson from Exodus Moses is like the parent and his fellow Israelites are like the kids. God used Moses to lead the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, through the parted waters of the Red Sea, into the wilderness of the desert on their way to the Promised Land. They were in the middle of nowhere and they counted on Moses to lead them where they were supposed to go. It's like Moses was the only one with GPS. They freaked out when he left them for 40 days and 40 nights to meet God on the mountain. Remember the trouble the *Home Alone* kid got into when his parents left town?? That was nothing compared to what the Israelites were up to.

Remember where they'd lived their whole lives: Egypt, a land that worshiped many gods, in **all** kinds of shapes, often looking like animals: Horus had the head of a falcon, Anubis the head of a jackal, Hathor the head of a cow. In the Near East many peoples worshiped the image of a bull, symbolizing leadership, strength, fertility. The word translated as "calf" in this story from Exodus is actually "young bull" -- The longer Moses was gone, the more the people feared he was never going to return and the deeper they

longed for someone/something to fill the power vacuum. So Aaron, Moses' brother, had the not-so-inspired idea of giving the people something to rally around, a golden bull.

God knows what's up and gives Moses his marching orders:

*"Go! Get down there! Your people whom you brought up from the land of Egypt have fallen to pieces. In no time at all they've turned away from the way I commanded them: They made a molten calf and worshiped it. They've sacrificed to it and said, "These are the gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt." (Exodus 32:7-8, The Message)*

God is very upset:

*"I look at this people – oh! What a stubborn, hardheaded people! Let me alone now, give my anger free rein to burst into flames and incinerate them." (Exodus 32:9-10a, The Message)*

Yikes! But Moses goes to bat for his people. "Tells the Lord He should be mindful of His holy **reputation**. Does the Lord want the Egyptians to **laugh** at God, saying that God saved the Israelites from the Egyptians, only to slaughter them in the desert? Moses also **reminds** God of the divine promise to give the people a promised land and plenty of children, down through the ages. Moses' intercession worked.

*And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people. (Exodus 32:14)*

God had mercy on the children of Israel. **All** our readings this weekend are about God having mercy. In Psalm 51 (which we also hear every Ash Wednesday), King David sings:

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.*

Psalm 51:1

The Israelites had been guilty of idolatry in connection with their "golden calf"; King David was guilty of adultery and murder in connection with his beautiful neighbor Bathsheba and her faithful husband Uriah.

*Remove my sins... and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be purer than snow.  
Psalm 51:7*

In our second lesson from the 1<sup>st</sup> letter to Timothy, Paul confesses:

*...I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy... and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 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.  
1 Timothy 1:13-15*

Jesus is attracted to sinners like bees are drawn to honey or like iron filings fly to a magnet. Our magnificent Gospel is from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of St. Luke. Over the summer we heard the parable of the lost son (the prodigal son). Today we hear two related parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin. The bottom line is: **Jesus seeks the lost. Jesus loves sinners. Jesus reaches out in mercy to all God's children.**

Because of stories like the one about the golden calf in Exodus, some people have believed that the God of the Old Testament is angry and the God of the New Testament is merciful, so they must be two different Gods. That's heresy, fake news (religiously speaking), an untrue belief. The God of the Exodus **is** the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This God so **loved** the world that He sent His Son, His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life.... We don't have to talk God out of obliterating us. God's burning desire isn't to punish us but to have us return home, like the lost son, the lost daughter. God scans the horizon for us, runs out to greet us, decks us out in party clothes and throws a lost-and-found/welcome-home gala! Or if we're like the lost sheep in today's parable, having nibbled ourselves **so** lost, gotten ourselves into **such** a pickle that we're too confused and exhausted to **find** our way back, God actually leaves home, comes to find us

and depending on our size and condition, either heaves us over His shoulder or scoops us up in His arms for the journey home. I like this description:

*Jesus is that shepherd coming down the lane with a shepherd's crook shaped like a cross.<sup>1</sup>*

A number of years ago our previous bishop, Roy Reilly, preached on this text to the synod pastors and reminded us all that we who are found are commissioned to go out again and find those who are still lost or missing. That message isn't just for called leaders, it's for every baptized Christian. Bishop Reilly said:

"It's a long walk with a heavy sheep on the Shepherd's shoulders... Restoration, bringing someone home, is hard work, and it usually takes a long time and a lot of effort, whatever the definition of 'lost' is."

At various points in our lives we're all guilty of being spiritually lost. We don't literally dance around a golden calf like the Israelites but there are plenty of other false gods we serve. We may not be guilty of adultery or murder like David, but we may have betrayed a confidence, killed a friendship, been less-than-faithful to those who depend on us personally or professionally. We probably aren't blasphemers, persecutors or people of violence as Paul describes himself, but each of us **is** a sinner in need of God's mercy. Having *...received mercy* [in Holy Baptism and every time we receive this Holy Supper] *... [may] the grace of our Lord [overflow] for [us] with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*. May God's love overflow the cup of our lives and drench the world with grace. Amen

<sup>1</sup>*Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), p. 266.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham