

Sermon
17 Pentecost—Proper 19-C
September 15, 2013
William Bradbury

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28
Psalm 14
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

One good practice when reading scripture is to place yourself in the story and experience it from that point of view.

For example today we could place ourselves with the Pharisees and the scribes who are grumbling.

Forgive me if I'm wrong but I bet most of us naturally place ourselves with those who were lost and are now found-- sinners, tax collectors, sheep and coin.

This feels right and good—just like when we sing “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost and now am found, was blind and now I see.”

But let's go a little deeper: how many of us really in other circumstances like telling people that we are “lost”?

My GPS has saved me on many occasions from having to admit I'm lost and ask for directions.

Maybe today we don't mind admitting that when we were in college we were confused and couldn't find our way, but that's only because, years later, we think we've really got things together.

--Which is to say that if we're honest most of us today are actually much closer to the scribes and Pharisees than we are to the tax collectors and sinners.

After all the scribes and Pharisees, like all faithful Jews, pray three times a day and go to worship every Sabbath; they pay their tithes, they take care of the widows and orphans; they read their Bibles. They are responsible citizens who are trying their best to love God and love their neighbor.

These are the good guys!

But they are not happy with Jesus. They grumble because Jesus is upsetting the religious script for happiness they've followed their whole lives.

That script says that those who don't steal from work and don't cheat on their spouses are the good people that God loves.

Then along comes this rabbi who is taking the bad people, the people who do cheat and steal and don't go to church and transforming them into good guys too, just like that.

We worked hard being the good guys and now Jesus is bringing **those people** into our club.

God's heart may be to look for the broken and lost but it certainly isn't our heart to do so.

I mean what good does it do to work hard to succeed when anybody can join for free?

These people are serious sinners and Jesus is treating them like they are one of us?

--Which betrays the fact that we don't think of ourselves as lost, misdirected and confused, maybe, but never lost.

We think lost people eat in soup kitchens and sleep in shelters and many of them belong in jail.

--which betrays the fact that we don't really understand what God's forgiveness really is about.

There are at least two mistakes we make about forgiveness.

The first is to imagine forgiveness will only come to you if you feel guilty for a really long time. So getting forgiven for that fight you had with your father 20 years ago requires that you wallow in guilt for 20 years. If you can feel badly enough for long enough maybe one day God will set you free.

I think I was raised in the milieu of this belief, so I was astounded when I read Father Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk and founder of the Centering Prayer movement, say that guilt should only last a few minutes. Just long enough to get your attention so you can confess your sin to God and then move on.

He says if you carry guilt around longer than that it's a sign the ego has taken over and is trying to earn forgiveness.

So the first mistake is trying to be worthy of forgiveness by feeling guilt for a long time.

The second mistake is to confuse forgiveness with making excuses.

We like to think God understands why we did what we did and therefore God **excuses us instead of forgives us.**

We love doing this with ourselves. We are great at coming up with excuses for why we yelled at our spouse or cheated on our taxes. We are not so good, however, at finding excuses for people who sin against us.

Notice how easily you excuse yourself for driving badly, but how easily you yell and scream at others who do the same thing to you.

Of course, there are always legitimate excuses for bad behavior—like hunger and even genetics.

But finally when we're honest and go through all our excuses we will get to those "bits" of what we did that are, quite simply, inexcusable.

I was inspired here by C. S. Lewis' article "On Forgiveness" found in the collection called The Weight of Glory.

Inexcusable---those things we did that we can only stop and say: I can't believe I did that. There is simply no excuse.

The ego can't tolerate this word, so it either chooses the path of lifelong guilt or the path of endless excuses.

Either way it tries to avoid having to appear helpless and in need. In a word the ego can't face the fact that it is lost. That it has messed up; that it has done something inexcusable—not just twenty years ago but five minutes ago when we yelled at your kids.

Here's the gospel truth: God is out to get us! God is out to get us---not to punish but to save.

We are not punished for our sins, rather we are punished by our sins.

God comes to save us from ourselves.

God sends Jesus precisely to do this. **But only those who have faced their inexcusability can repent of it and receive what Jesus offers.**

Only those who admit they are lost can experience being found.

Here's the good news: God can and does forgive the inexcusable.

That thing you can't forgive yourself for, God can and does forgive.

Paul names it in his own life: "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, **even though** I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence."

There is an "even though" in your life and mine: even though I am a sinner, God forgives me.

As Paul writes today: "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."

The key gospel truth is this: when your conscience alerts you to your sin, take it to God in sorrow and regret and then spend the rest of your time focusing on God for it is from God that forgiveness comes.

Every moment we spend time trying to excuse away our sin is time lost enjoying the forgiveness of God.

Every moment we spend time wallowing in our guilt is time lost enjoying the forgiveness of God.

Every moment we spend thinking we are one of the good guys is time not spent enjoying Christ's community of sinners, who by grace at the same time are also saints.

That's the paradox Luther saw: we are sinner and saint at the same time.

We are scribe and sinner, Pharisee and Tax collector—at the same time.

We belong to the only group there is: the human one.

And in Christ we know God forgives the inexcusable in all of us.

And in Christ God invites us to share his joy of forgiving ourselves and forgiving others—even though they have done inexcusable things to us.

Then we will know the joy in heaven when the lost is found and brought back into the fold.