

Guilty of Compassion

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Luke 15:1-10

Circle of Mercy: September 12, 2010

I love encountering divine coincidences—which is what I felt on Monday when I consulted the lectionary and discovered that the passage we just heard is the gospel lesson for today. Two weeks ago, on our annual Circle of Mercy family retreat, Ken invited us to share with those gathered an early experience of faith, a defining moment from childhood or early adulthood that shaped us and set us on the path of discipleship. I learned quite a few things that I didn't know about some of the members of this Circle.

I'm very grateful for the rich sharing of that weekend—which also included in other sessions telling a more recent story of transformation from our faith journeys, and our story of joining Circle of Mercy. Nancy, Ken, and I plan to include more of this kind of sharing in our Sunday worship through testimonials—of the sort that Kaki Roberts and Terri Farless have offered about their experiences as Sunday school teachers, and that Beth Buys, Beth Maczka, and Chris Semper drew from their everyday challenges on the discipleship path. There is much we can learn from one another.

In response to Ken's invitation on Saturday afternoon of the retreat, I thought back to my earliest church memory. I was five years old. Having been born severely pigeon-toed, I was newly in possession of leg braces, which earned me the nickname of "Cripple" from my classmates and made me the target of some cruel behavior.

For birthdays at the First United Methodist Church on Chocolate Avenue in Hershey, Pennsylvania, our Sunday school teacher brought out a plastic bank in the shape of a cake. On our day, we were instructed to place the number of pennies equal to our age into it—an offering for "less fortunate" children. After I slipped my five pennies into the fake cake, the teacher invited me to choose a picture from among a small array that included the classic poses of Jesus: knocking at the door, feeding the crowd, stilling the storm. I knew immediately which one I wanted.

The one I took home was the same as the one on our altar tonight, though a much smaller version. This larger one hung for many years by my mother's bed. But she's now in a room that has space for only one picture, and my sisters and I chose a family portrait. I began wondering yesterday when I removed it from my own bedroom wall whether I should substitute Jesus for the family to watch over my Mom in her final days.

As a five-year-old feeling marginal and isolated, my attention went immediately to that picture of Jesus cradling the lost lamb. I knew the parable of the Good Shepherd who abandoned the other sheep to go in search of the one who had strayed. I felt like that lost lamb, and I drew great comfort from that image over many years. It stood on a little stand by my bed as reassurance of Jesus' tender care and love.

Eight years after I chose that picture, Martin Luther King was assassinated. From thirteen miles away in Hershey, we watched as Harrisburg, our capital city, exploded in fires and violence, driven by rage and despair. Fear was the most palpable response in Hershey—fear that "they" were going to come and tear down our amusement park or tear up our golf courses or sabotage our chocolate factory. I wanted to understand what drove people in Harrisburg to burn down their own homes, but no adult in my world was interested in my questions. The standard response was "Nothing for you to worry about"—meaning "white girl from Hershey."

I did worry about it, though, and a few years later I was taking a college semester in East Harlem, trying to understand racism and economic injustice. I had abandoned Jesus in the meantime, believing that gentle shepherd to be too pretty and passive to care about such harsh realities. When I discovered liberation theology in Harlem, I was more than ready to ditch the Good Shepherd for the Big, Bad Liberator. The parable of the lost sheep was no longer my guiding scripture. I moved on to the fourth chapter of Luke: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free."

The Good Shepherd had worked for me for the first twenty years of my life, and the Liberator Jesus for the second twenty. But about the time I went to South Africa in 1997 to observe the Truth & Reconciliation process there, I realized that I needed a new image again. In hearings throughout that country, those who had suffered such unspeakable horror and atrocity under apartheid told their heart-wrenching stories in vivid detail—and then offered forgiveness to their torturers.

Through their courage and their tears, my concept of justice was turned totally upside down. My new identifying passage came from the second chapter of Ephesians: "Jesus is our peace; he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall between us, reconciling both groups to God in one body through the cross"; and from the fifth chapter of Second Corinthians: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to God's self through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

As I'm creeping toward what is likely be the last twenty-something-year span of my life—I turn 56 next week—I find myself coming full circle. In the process of downsizing my Mom's space and possessions—as well as my own—I've returned to the comforting image of the Good Shepherd, who now hangs next to my bed as he did for many years next to my Mom's. Maybe it's because I live much of my life alone, or that I'm facing the challenges and limitations of middle age, or soon to be an orphan. I find myself needing again that comforting reassurance that I am one of God's beloved children, a "lost lamb" worth going after.

I'm more open at this age to the repentance part of the parable in verses 6 and 7. I'm more humble about my failings and weaknesses; more at peace with what I can and cannot change; more aware of the critical importance of confession and forgiveness as building blocks of the life of faith as well as of community.

The theme of repentance is repeated in the parable of the lost coin that follows the lost sheep. This story also highlights the fervency and diligence of the search for the lost one, and the rejoicing that comes from discovery and from recognizing grace.

The opening of the fifteenth chapter of Luke, the context for our two parables tonight, is a scene in which the Pharisees and scribes are "grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" Yep, they nailed Jesus. That's exactly what he did. Openly and joyfully.

The scribes and Pharisees, who were preoccupied with the letter of the law—who were anxious to separate people into "good" and "bad"—had their grumbling responded to with two parables about grace. And just in case they didn't get it the first two times, Jesus followed these with the parable of the prodigal son, who repented and returned home to a lavish welcome. Grace abounds. And all of us are in need to it. Jesus refuses the "good" and "bad" polarity.

There are no "others" at the table of God; there are no distinctions of "good" and "bad." We are all welcomed here into the arms of Jesus—like a lost lamb is embraced by the Good Shepherd.

Interesting that the parable of the lost sheep appears in the lectionary today. Without its context, we might be tempted to see it merely as a beautiful and poignant reminder of Jesus' tender care. But the parable is also a "wolf in sheep's clothing." There's some bite here. And an important message to today's Christians who still want to divide the world into "good" and "evil"—say, for example, a church in Florida that believed that burning Qu'rans would be a good idea.

Yesterday we marked the anniversary of what has come to be for many the greatest symbol of the polarity of good and evil in our time. Interesting that this year, the day before, Muslims concluded their holy month of Ramadan with the feast of Eid al-Fitr—which, incidentally, came the day after the Jews' observance of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Fortunately, someone in Western North Carolina had a much better idea than burning Qu'rans.

Monroe Gilmour, coordinator of Western North Carolina Citizens for an End to Institutional Bigotry, went to the Islamic Center of Asheville's Eid al-Fitr feast and celebration on Friday morning. He reported in an email, "I felt impelled to attend to say to the Imam and others, 'You all are not alone. The vast majority of folks in our region support you and share your pain and sorrow for what has transpired in Gainesville, Florida, and in other situations around the country.'" Monroe continued, "I will never forget the appreciative looks of gratitude in their faces when I spoke those words."

This fellow welcomes Muslims and eats with them. May we all be so guilty of hospitality and compassion. May we keep on welcoming prisoners and immigrants and those of other faiths whom others would hasten to label as "sinners."

And may we continue to examine our own lives—and our complicity with the policies of our imperial nation that push people to extraordinary desperation. Would our prisons be so full if we had equal opportunity and guaranteed employment in the United States? Would our borders be so overrun if our trade policies didn't undermine the livelihoods of Mexican citizens? Would our nation be the target of terrorist acts like 9/11 if we didn't extort the resources of the globe and arm the world?

There are many things we can do, by the grace of God. Let me offer just a few. Tomorrow night there's a training for those who are willing to be nonviolent witnesses at traffic checkpoints throughout Asheville, which have been set up and used as initiation points for deportation of Latino sisters and brothers in our community. See Tim Nolan for the details.

On our altar tonight are three letters. One is for our sisters and brothers at the Islamic Center of Asheville, expressing our solidarity and support. The other two are for Troy Davis, whose last appeal to save his life was denied last month, and Wiley Dobbs, our friend on death row in Georgia who considers Troy his son. I invite you to sign them when you come to the table for communion, or after the service.

There are no "others" at the table of God. There are no distinctions of "good" and "bad." We are all welcomed here into the arms of Jesus—like a lost lamb is embraced by the Good Shepherd, who searches with all diligence until the flock is all gathered and together.

So, let us live in the assurance that we are all the beloved children of God. And let us take the lavish love and grace that we have been so tenderly given and share it extravagantly with a hurting, divided world.

Amen.