

THE CHANGING OF MINDS

EXODUS 32:7-14; LUKE 14:25-35

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

SEPTEMBER 15, 2013/17TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Every once in a while when I sit down on Tuesday morning with the text for the following Sunday, I have this eerie sense that this text looks very familiar.

Perhaps you're thinking, "well it *better* look familiar... you're *supposed* to be reasonably well-acquainted with the Bible!" ☺

But sometimes I have this sense that I've either written about or preached on this text before. I imagine that people who have been preaching sermons for far longer than I have this experience regularly, but I'm still new enough at this for it to be a relatively rare occurrence.

So, I did a bit of digging around in my files and, lo and behold, I discovered that I *had* preached on this text before. This was the text I used on my first Sunday here in Lethbridge just over two years ago.

Well, I couldn't just say what I said last time again, attractive as that option seemed as Friday afternoon approached far too quickly, as usual ☺.

I wanted to find something *different* to say about a text that is *already* a very well loved, familiar, and a reasonably straightforward one.

So, I want to take a bit of a different approach today. I want us to consider this well-known text about lost sheep and lost coins *alongside* a very different text, our OT reading from the Exodus 32.

Let's begin with our text from Luke.

This text comes right after last week's text about the cost of discipleship. In addition to Jesus' words being difficult, they seemed to attract the "wrong sorts of people." The tax collectors and the sinners were coming to listen.

So, the Pharisees did what people with power and a vested interest in maintaining the status quo often do when threatened with something new and challenging that calls into question many of their own cherished assumptions about how God works and who God prefers.

They changed the subject. And they attempted to cast aspersions on the one whose message they found so threatening.

Look at this guy, they say... He welcomes and eats with the sorts of people that holy, upright people should be avoiding!

Jesus responds with the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin as a way of exposing the Pharisees utter failure to understand God's desire for all people, and his determination to welcome all kinds of different people into his family.

To a group of grumpy, uptight religious experts more concerned with policing the borders of "God's people," Jesus reveals a God who is desperate to seek out the unlikely, the unlovely, the rejected, and to help steer them back on course.

Jesus gives them a picture of a celebration in heaven, of a joyful God and his angels over one "sinner" who changes his mind, who repents, who turns around and begins to walk on the right path.

In our OT text from Exodus, we see a very different picture of God with respect to the lost.

The scene is well known. Moses is up on the mountain for forty days, receiving the Law. Down below, the people get tired of waiting and they convince Aaron to make them a new god, a golden calf, a symbol of Canaanite fertility.

Aaron relents, and Moses descends from the mountain to witness the spectacle of the very people that God had dramatically and miraculously rescued from the jaws of slavery and oppression in Egypt, bowing down to a golden statue.

God is livid.

In verse 10, he says to Moses, *leave me alone so that my anger can burn against them. I will wash my hands of them, wipe them out and start again. I'll make a great nation out of you instead!*

What follows is quite remarkable. Moses talks God out of destroying his people, out of starting over (similar to Abraham negotiating with God for the people of Sodom in Genesis 18).

And God changes his mind.

It's even more fascinating to observe *how* this happens.

Listen to how God describes the idolatrous, rebellious children of Israel to Moses in verse 7:

The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! **Your people**, whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely;

God is so fed up with the people that he wants nothing to do with them, and takes no responsibility for them. They are Moses' people, not God's!

Moses responds, in v. 11-13, by almost gently chiding God, saying:

But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against **your people**, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?

Moses reminds God of his call and his covenant with these people. He says, in a sense, *You called these people, not me. You made promises to them, not me. You have bound yourself to them and you cannot abandon them now!*

Moses appeals to God's own reputation and to God's own promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And then, verse 14—among the most striking in all of Scripture:

And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

This idea of God changing his mind might make us squirm, on a number of levels.

How can an all-knowing God change his mind? How could God be so eager to wipe out these people that he had made a covenant with? Why does God seem so angry? Is Moses *shaming* God into acting as God ought to act? Does God need reminding of his promises?

These are troubling questions, and while there are some things we could say (a few of which I mentioned a few weeks ago in our sermon about Joshua, about paying attention to literary and cultural context, etc.), at the end of the day there are no nice easy answers.

This makes us uncomfortable, but it isn't necessarily all bad.

Tim Keller put it well in his book, *The Reason for God*:

*Now, what happens if you eliminate anything from the Bible that offends your sensibility and crosses your will? If you pick and choose what you want to believe and reject the rest, how will you ever have a God who can contradict you? ... **Only if your God can say things that outrage you and make you struggle (as in a real friendship or marriage!) will you know that you have gotten hold of a real God and not a figment of your imagination.***

In other words, the assumption that God ought always to behave and reveal himself in ways that conform to our (profoundly limited) expectations might be worth challenging.

But what we *can* say about this text, beyond a shadow of a doubt, is that God is not a dispassionate, celestial observer of the affairs of the cosmos.

For a large portion of Christian history, under the influence of Greek philosophical assumptions about perfection, theologians have considered the idea that God could be moved or changed or influenced by human beings as unworthy of God.

If God is perfect, they reasoned, then nothing can be added or subtracted to God. If God could experience emotion or change that would mean that something was a part of God that wasn't previously there. God doesn't need anything from anyone, the argument goes—he exists in eternal, completeness and perfection.

This came to be known as the doctrine of the impassibility of God.

Now, in our day, we don't bother with these kinds of arcane philosophical categories and arguments.

Our approach looks a bit different.

Christian Smith is a sociologist from Notre Dame University, and has spend a lot of time analyzing the religious beliefs of North American young adults. He coined the term, Moral Therapeutic Deism to describe the default spirituality he sees today, both in young adults and beyond.

Here's how Smith describes it:

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Neither the impassible God of historical Christian theology, nor the remote uninvolved God of Moral Therapeutic Deism bear any resemblance to the God of the Bible.

This is not the God of Exodus 32 who is talked out of wiping out his people in frustration and weariness by his servant Moses, the God who is so fed up with these people that he so desperately wants to choose life, yet continue choosing death...

This is not the God of Luke 15 who longs for what has been lost, who is a passionate lover, who experiences genuine *joy* when his children repent and turn around.

Blaise Pascal was a 17th century French mathematician and philosopher who knew all about God as an abstract idea, a solution to a problem, an explanation for phenomena. But it was this God of desire and passion and longing who stirred his soul.

On November 23, in 1654 Blaise Pascal had a dramatic encounter with God. He wrote of his experience, and sewed it into the liner of his coat. It wasn't until after his death that people learned of this and realized everywhere he went Pascal carried this experience with him. This encounter has become known as "Pascal's Night of Fire."

Here is part of what Pascal had stitched into his coat:

The year of grace 1654

Monday, 23 November...

From about half past ten in the evening until half past midnight.

Fire

'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,' not of philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

I think Pascal encountered the God of Luke 15 and Exodus 32.

The portrayals of God in these two texts look very different, but the thread that unites them both is the **desire of God** and the **centrality of relationship**.

God is not a set of principles or a way of speaking about timeless moral laws or an unapproachable deity in the sky who cannot be influenced.

God is a personal agent who is, *and always has been*, affected by his interaction with his human image bearers.

Our God is a God who *relates* to his people and to be in a relationship is to change, to adapt, to accommodate, to grow, to learn...

We may be uneasy predicating these things about God, but the Bible gives us permission to do so.

God has bound his own joy to us and to our choices.

God has opened himself up, and allowed himself to be influenced by the human wills.

God has allowed us to play a part in this story that is unfolding.

We are not puppets, nor is history or our own lives a blueprint that has already been mapped out. We have a role to play!

None of this should surprise us, for we know this from the realm of human relationships, whether it is the relationship of a parent to a child or siblings or friends or lovers or whatever.

In order to open ourselves up to love and to be loved by someone else, we also open ourselves up to being hurt, to being inconvenienced, to having obligations placed upon us, to realizing that there is more to consider than ourselves.

I think the same is true for God.

If God wanted to exist in glorious, Trinitarian perfection forever, he need not have created a world or human beings at all.

But God chose to create, and opened himself up to the joy, the pain, the delight, the sorrow, the anger, the frustration, the surprise, and most importantly, the love that can be experienced when we enter into a living relationship with someone else.

So, we have this God who opens himself up to outside influence, who passionately pursues his people, whose mind can even be changed in the context of ongoing relationship.

What difference does any of this make for you and me in daily life?

In closing, I will simply focus on one aspect of the life of faith that I know people struggle with.

Prayer.

We often feel like we have to pray in a certain way, like it is a kind of performance where we have to sound religious, and say the right things, and demonstrate our worthiness to God, and if we do everything right, God *may* just be inclined to grant our requests.

Whatever else we might want to say about the God revealed in our texts today, at the very least we have to say that God is not put off by honest, even belligerent and confrontative engagement with him about what is troubling us, what we find difficult of confusing.

I had a conversation with someone about this just the other night. They were really struggling with the amount of evil in our world, with what is going on in Syria, with loved ones who are dying, about all the sadness in our world, and having a very hard time praying.

“So, confront God!” I said. “Don’t just mouth platitudes or formulaic prayers. Pray like Moses, like Job, like the Psalmists, like Jesus...”

As Stefan mentioned a few weeks ago in his children’s story about “yelling prayer,” be honest with God. Scream, rage, complain, say, “what about your promises?!” God can take it. God has *always* been able to take it.

We need never be ashamed or unwilling to bring all of who we are and what we are feeling before God in prayer, because we always approach God in the context of *relationship*.

We are honest about our feelings, our sin, our need. And we open ourselves up to our hearts and minds being changed in the process—to seeing our need for repentance in new ways, to seeing God’s purposes and longing for the children he loves in new ways, to participating in God’s groaning for the world in new ways.

And, strange as it may sound, I think that God is changed in the process, too.

God has bound himself to us. God has opened himself up to be affected by his creation.

We walk together with this God on the path of change, toward the new creation that is promised.

Thanks be to God.