

These gospel stories are familiar ones. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. We've heard them all our lives. Maybe we heard them first as children just starting to learn about God's love for us. Or maybe we heard them first when we'd made a mistake and someone reminded us that to Jesus we still "count," and that he comes after us, like the shepherd and the woman, to find us and bring us back into the fold.

This week I heard two words in these parables that stuck out to me, words that eventually made me think a little different about them. **Repent, and Rejoice!** Both parables end with these basic words: "Just so, I tell you," Jesus says, "there is joy [rejoicing] in heaven over one sinner who repents."

We know this word Rejoice! It means to have Joy, to celebrate! But Repentance is a thicker word. Literally it means "to turn around," to go a different direction.

So hang on to these words [repent, and rejoice] for the next few minutes.

I heard these words elsewhere in our readings too. The author of 1 Timothy describes the way he used to be “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.” “A sinner - of whom I was foremost” he repents. “But,” he continues, “I received mercy, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me.” That sounds to me, if not like rejoicing, then reason for rejoicing, for proclaiming that last verse: “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen!”

The words of Psalm 51 are truly the words of someone in repentance. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. I have sinned against you and done what is evil in your sight. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my wickedness.” But also, “Let me hear joy and gladness; that this broken body may rejoice.”

And our reading from Exodus. Having rescued them from Egypt and showing God’s mighty arm at the Red Sea, God is ready to destroy the Israelites for making and bowing down to other gods. Against the express commandments of God! “Now let me alone,” God tells Moses, “so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them!” But Moses reminds God that these are God’s people, descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, those to whom God promised “descendants like the stars, this very special land, and inheritance forever.” God repents, and with a change of mind, turns around. This is cause for relief, if not also rejoicing.

Last week, I brought up the larger story of Moses and the Israelites - I reminded you what happened when the Israelites finally crossed over the Jordan into the promised land: The seizure of land, colonization and conquest. This biblical story has echoed in the history of this country, in the state of Montana. And for a community now building a church, a wonderful achievement and an amazing/exciting thing, that history echoes again in this project. But the difference for us is that we can choose how we enter that land, what we do with the building we put upon it, how it is we honor its unique story and the people who loved it first. Hallelujah!

That is God's call to us in this good work, Messiah. But to respond to that call requires us to look | at both a history we might rather ignore and the circumstances that are its legacy. This sounds to me like a call to repentance. But rather than an immediate "turn away" from these truths, I hear in these readings God first asking us to turn toward them.

Reading 1 Timothy, I heard a man in a new life situation looking at some hard things - who he used to be. He was not proud of that man. But he was able to articulate what he used-to-be because (at some point) he had looked at that person honestly, without dodging the reality he was faced with.

Before the repentant turn-around and walking the other way, God asks us to first turn toward and look honestly at what God would have us turn from. It seems to me that this is the required first-step of repentance. Confession, as we see in Psalm 51, is what comes next; but can we confess what we refuse to look at? Like any 12 step program that leads someone from a life of addiction onto a path of recovery, the first step - "Admitting that one is powerless over the addiction" - can't be skipped. In other words, it pronounces the death of denial. Because denial * is the biggest roadblock to true repentance.

I want to check in with you now. Are you comfortable listening to this? I'm sure at least some of you, understandably, are not. And while that's not my intention, it's an important feeling that God has put in your path. So let's do something with it. In fact, let's do what I'm talking about.

If you're comfortable doing this, close your eyes. If you're not, just soften your gaze. And with the eyes of your heart and mind turn toward the source of the discomfort. What is it exactly that's got your blood up, that's unquiet in you? Can you identify it? Whether you can see clearly what it is or you're just feeling it fully, hold it for a minute. Then ask the question: What is at stake in this moment for you? What does doing this call into question? What is it that you fear? Open your eyes. Take a deep breath.

It's time for some good news.

The shepherd and the woman have shown us how to look at the hard thing. They have searched, gone over what is familiar terrain - grazing land and home. They have looked hard and found what they were after; that which had been missing. But their response to having found it is not the feeling of guilt, it's not the shame of having lost something they valued. Rather, they both rejoice. And not only that, they invite friends and neighbors to join them! "Rejoice with me!"

Joy. The result of that search, that recognition, that finding, is joy. The repentance in these parables is not that of the sheep or the "coin," but that of the shepherd and the woman. It is not their sin but their sense of responsibility to turn toward, search out and find what might have been lost. And their turning toward it, their repenting, leads them finally to joy - such joy, such depth of joy, that they need to share it. "Rejoice with me" they each say.

Do you hear that? The "turn toward" that both the shepherd and the woman make result in a drawing together of community. Is community not the place of healing that repentance ultimately brings? The sheep back to the fold, the coin back with the rest, the community rejoicing as one.

If you ask me, there was no lack of joy at what must have been a feast going on here. These “sinners” Jesus is eating with (prostitutes and tax collectors) are likely rejoicing at having been welcomed and joined by Jesus. Perhaps they are celebrating that Jesus came for them, came after them, searched them out and brought them in. Those charged by the community to do just that though, stand at the door grumbling.

Who is it then, in the scene of this party, this feast, who turn out to be the lost ones named in Jesus’ parables? Jesus’ invitation is to them too, though. What is the “turn toward” that they make for the sake of the community? “There will be more joy in heaven,” Jesus calls to them, “over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

AMEN

Psalm 51 echoes that hard, honest look at self that we hear in 1 Timothy. “I know my offenses, my wickedness, a sinner from my mother’s womb. “Indeed,” we read, “you [God] delight in truth deep within me, and would have me know wisdom deep within.” T

Not only a keen-eyed statement of repentance, it’s also a statement of faith - that to ask for mercy, to be washed, to be cleansed, to be renewed, comes from a trust that we will be cleansed and renewed, that mercy will be given.

Could it be that God’s call to us to turn around here is more a call to turn and look, honestly, bravely at what we would rather turn from?

All through these readings. Repenting and Rejoicing.

The author of 1 Timothy is demonstrating something I think we could use more of...

God who has shaped and formed me, you who have seen and called me, all this comes together in this moment where the

The gods before which we bow down [to which we sacrifice (our children)]

Comfort, safety, rugged individualism (stay found) [Jesus’ concern]

Moses - turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people (closes the distance God pronounces)

And the Lord changed his mind...

God repent from your fierce wrath

People, repent from your fierce wrath (People don’t make it to the PL)

Can one generation repent on behalf of another? God seems to think so

Jesus is addressing pharisees and scribes

Starts with a question - no one raises their hand (Some foolishness here)

Community - sheep returned to the fold, celebration

Bringing good news to others - Rejoice with me!

He's talking about both the people in the crowd and the religious officials...

Teaching Joy: What is Joy, what is cause for Joy?

Even one sinner who repents...

The Pharisees and the scribes are the lost sheep, like these "sinners"

My sin is ever before me

We turn away from looking at our sin, we hide from it.

Psalms 51 is facing it, looking at it, confessing it - confidently.

A faithful move - trust that God will blot out offenses, cleans us, etc.

REPENTANCE? Turning toward???. Shockingly, joy in heaven, not ...

Born steeped in wickedness

You delight in truth deep within me

and would have me know wisdom deep within

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me...

Timothy has turned back from blaspheming, persecuting, and violence

EVEN THOUGH

I received mercy and overflowing grace (the faith and love that are in CJ)

Came into the world to save sinners (foremost to utmost). We should be clamoring to be counted among them!