

"Recycling Our Lives" 3-6-16 CHC

Psalm 32

Luke 15:1-3

Years ago my son and I attended a Colorado Rockies baseball game in Denver. We parked on the street within a few blocks of the stadium. The game over, the Phillies defeated, we headed back to the car. As we approached the street where the car was parked we couldn't find it. Thinking that we may have not remembered accurately, we kept looking. However, I knew that was where we parked. Then I saw a sign I hadn't initially noticed. 'No Parking. Tow Away Zone'. Great! I found a policeman and asked, "Where do you tow the cars?" He told me where to go. It was a parking lot a couple miles away down Sheridan Boulevard. I knew where that was, but didn't like the neighborhood. I was feeling a bit xenophobic, fearful of walking through a part of town I considered unsafe. My stereotype of who I thought to live around that stretch of real estate is in full force. No matter, I said let's go and we started walking, fast.

We made it to the car, relieved, and headed homeward. As I reflect back on my fears and feelings I am amazed how easily I could conjure up those emotions. I had judged and classified a whole group of people as an enemy to fear and avoid. I wonder if the same thing is at work in our country. Jim Wallis makes the observation that "Many Christians are drawn to political xenophobia, because it legalizes their inmost sin, making it acceptable in their own eyes to hate, adhere to racist policies, and succumb to biases" (Wallis, "America's Original Sin: White Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America").

Xenophobia is as active in the human heart today as it was in Jesus' day. Jesus doesn't think much of it, however, then or now. Obviously, as we find him attracting and hanging out with tax collectors and sinners, we have to ask ourselves why they are so drawn to him, which I find fascinating and intriguing. Our churches are not known to be friendly and attractional venues for the marginalized and fallen of our world. What in his persona and being drew them in? Luke tells us that "they were all coming near to listen to him".

Contrast that with the spirit of the clergy of Jesus' day. Now they are truly xenophobic, fearful and full of hatred of foreigners, even of an element of their own people. They are not on the same page with Jesus. After all, it is an offence to them that Jesus eats with and befriends this element of society. They are "The People of the Land", those who don't keep the law or make any effort to do so.

Listen to the religious leaders' manual of regulations. "When a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey" (Barclay, 'The Gospel of Luke', p.206).

A Pharisee is forbidden to be a guest of any such person or to have that person as a guest. Contact with such a person will create defilement. The strict religious Jew thought this way: "There is joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God". Contrast the point Jesus is making in "The Parable of

the Lost Sheep”, where he says, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”. It is a rather sadistic view looks forward, not to the salvation, but to the destruction of the outlier. As they observe Jesus, they grumble among themselves, sarcastically saying that “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them”.

This sets Jesus up for a theological counter punch. He is reminding them, and us, that God’s attitude toward humanity is quite different. Luke 15 is often called “The Gospel within the Gospel”. Jesus tells three parables portraying the heart of God. One is “The Parable of the Lost Sheep”. A second one is “The Parable of the Lost Coin”. The third one we all know well, “The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother”.

To these religious leaders and experts in the law of God, Jesus asks if they will reconsider and join him in adopting a different view of God. “Instead of hating and condemning your neighbor, wouldn’t you rather welcome these lost souls as if they were family and friends and celebrate their recovery at the banquet table?”

Jesus wants us to know that God is concerned with recovering and redeeming those of us who have lost our way, both within and outside the faith community. That is what our Psalm is all about. “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, those to whom the Lord imparts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit”. The path into God’s heart is acknowledgement of our ‘lostness’, our sin. David confesses, “Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’, and you forgave the guilt of my sin”.

English literature is replete with this theme of the prodigal. Dickens’ “Great Expectations” tells of Pip. He becomes dissatisfied with his village life, goes to the city to become a gentleman, wastes all he has, and is brought home by a kindly father figure, Joe Gregory. Then there is Estella, who rejects Pip to marry Drummle out of spite and ambition. She finds herself abused and widowed. Returning to her childhood home she reunites with Pip whose love for her never changed.

In “My Antonia”, author Willa Cather, tells of Antonia who goes to the city to work. She is lured by the worldly pleasures of the jazz culture. Destitute, she returns to the awaiting love of her family for a fresh start.

Then there is another Dickens’ character, Emily, in “David Copperfield”. A prodigal daughter, she runs away with Steerforth. He takes her across Europe and abandons her. Afraid to face her Uncle Peggotty, she returns to England where he lovingly finds and restores her (Above a synopsis from ‘Homiletics’, March-April, 2016, p.16).

We are hungry for grace and love, the righteous and the unrighteous. And Jesus exudes the grace and love that is so appealing, then as now. Aren’t we all responsive to people who reflect God’s Spirit of grace in their lives? We are drawn to them. Those drawn to Jesus feel no condemnation. Around him, like flowers before the sun, hearts and spirits open up. As the Body of Christ, isn’t it logical that we be so within this fallen world?

Ann Lamott, in her book, "Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith", reflects on grace. I like how she frames it. "I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us" (Anchor, 1999. P.143).

That's Jesus. He meets the tax collectors and sinners where they are, accepting and loving them as people created in God's image. It is the same for us and the people around us, even those we don't like, are afraid of and may even hate. But he doesn't leave us where he finds us. Again, David shows us the path where the forgiving love and grace of God leads us; self-awareness, acknowledgement of our sin, confession, and into the arms of God's love and grace.

Let me tell you a story about a Nigerian woman, Bilikiss Adebisi-Abiola. She leaves her home in Lagos, Nigeria and matriculates at MIT where she earns an MBA. Her hopes are to start a business or work for an established company at a high salary. Then she would be able to earn enough money to send to her family and buy what she desires. As time goes on she discovers that this is not really who she wants to be. Like the prodigal far from home, she comes to herself.

While in this country she observes people recycling their trash. She learns how recycling decreases the amount of trash in landfills. It is at this time that Bilikiss remembers how much accumulated trash lies in the streets back home. In Lagos, her home, about 60 per cent of the trash made by the 21 million residents is never collected. It sits in piles, often in the streets.

She begins to see new possibilities to use her MBA in Nigeria instead of remaining comfortably in America. She returns home and starts a company called Wecyclers. In her attempts to educate the people little response follows. People do not change their ways easily.

Another revelation comes to her. Instead of showing what recycling could do for the city, she would show what it could do for them. She did the math. Lagos generates around 735,000 tons of plastic yearly, worth about \$300 million to waste brokers who resell it to recyclers. "That's money lying on the street", Bilikiss thought.

So she starts offering incentives. She pays people for their recyclables. Visiting some 6,000 homes weekly, exchanging cash and household goods for recyclables, she collects 40 tons per month. Lost money left on the streets is being reclaimed. People are being helped economically. What was once trash is now seen as a treasure (Homiletics, p.14-15).

The tax collectors and sinners of Jesus' day are tagged as discarded trash by the so-called righteous. But Jesus sees them as recyclable treasure. God sees value where we often don't. There may even be self-recriminating voices within demeaning our personal value. But Jesus lets us know that we are not abandoned, even when we are in a faraway land at a great distance from the Father's love. God sees what we don't and has no intention of relegating us to a landfill. Certainly God saw those people in that Denver neighborhood I walked through far differently than I did.

God is all about redeeming, recycling us, if you will. Like the waiting Father seeing his son, now turned toward home, God runs toward us, embraces us, and says, "You're home!"

