

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

16 Pentecost
September 16, 2007
Fr. Bill McGinty

“The Lost Sheep”

At the 10'o clock service today there will be the first of our six special 'Wellness' liturgies which you have been reading about in the September Cobblestone. The theme of today's liturgy is: "To be on the right path on our spiritual journey"

It is a theme that we also find in today's second reading from Paul to Timothy. Paul, who is now quite old, is reflecting on his life, and how he had been on a path of vengeance and destruction against the Christians until that fateful day when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He counts himself the worst of sinners and the many bad things that he did against the Christians still haunts him. But he knows that he will be saved not because of his work or the many people he has converted, but because Jesus died on a cross to save him.

Of all the countless lines of sinners that Jesus saved on that Good Friday, Paul counts himself last, at the very back of the line, the worst of sinners but saved by Christ's redeeming love.

There is nothing that can stop Christ saving you, Paul tells Timothy later, except that you refuse to repent or fail to forgive another.

The Gospel tells us that that is difficult to do. It is difficult not to be saved, because our God comes looking for us. Just like the sheep and the lost penny God will search until he finds us and he will offer us the saving love of his son all over again. For us not to be saved we must turn and say: "No!" I reject your salvation. I do not want to be saved. I will not give up my sin I will not forgive. I will hold on to my possessions. I reject you as my God.

Paul turns his life around because he embraces Christ's salvation. In the Gospel Jesus tells the Pharisees and scribes not to be surprised that he has been sent to seek out sinners. "I have come to seek out the lost sheep of the House of Israel."

The Pharisees are shocked because they believed that salvation was about obeying the law and the commandments Instead they discover that salvation is about allowing yourself to be found and loved by your God.

Which of us, would not change places with Paul in this reading and accept the last place in Christ's line of salvation?

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Yet, in his teaching Jesus makes it easier still for us by inviting us to take his place and embrace the poor and the sinner. In doing so, we ourselves say a resounding ‘yes’ to God. Whether it is the Food Pantry or the Thanksgiving Dinner we find ourselves ‘found’, when we stand on the site of God in helping others. It is your ‘yes’ it is our affirmation of Christ’s salvation to all.

God makes salvation easy. In the first reading the words of Yahweh are put in the month of Jeremiah. He tells the Israelites: “The reason that you ‘*don’t get it*’, is because you are so stupid. I took you out of the desert and a life of slavery and gave you a Promised Fertile Land, but you destroy everything with your evil ways. I gave you a Creation instead of a watery chaos, but you insist in turning it back into chaos and desert.

If you think about it, today’s first reading could have been written by Al Gore talking about Global warming.

The Book of Genesis is at pains to point out that God created beauty out of chaos, but that man brings ugliness and pain by choosing evil, sin and death.

Once Adam and Eve are thrown out of the Garden everything that follows is a return to chaos. It is a simple lesson. “God brings life, sin brings destruction and death.”

As the Messiah, Jesus comes bringing a second Creation. It is the creation of a Kingdom that seeks to heal, mend and bind up the wounds of sin and restore people to God. Teaching this to his disciples Jesus tells them many stories and parables. His most famous of course is the story of the Prodigal Son. Yet, many scholars point out that the main lesson is lost to too many people.

Jesus addresses the Story to Pharisees and scribes who are murmuring against him because he chose to eat with tax collectors and sinners. Bishop Paul insists the story is really about the elder brother who comes home from the fields and will not celebrate with his Father at the return of the Prodigal Son. “He has wasted all your money on gambling and wild women and now you kill the fatted calf, while you would not give me a small goat to celebrate with my friends.”

Bishop Paul asks this question: “Why do we find it so hard to accept that even sinners can be saved? Is it that in accepting their salvation we believed that our own salvation is somehow diminished?”

“No,” Jesus says, “be glad and praise God that the sheep was lost has now been found.”

As we participate in the 6 discussions on Friday evenings; the first one took place at my house last Friday, we have been concerned with the ‘Recovery of our true story’ as a church

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and a parish. In researching our archives and records you cannot help but see how the mission of the church down the years has been linked to these teachings of Jesus. It has been expressed and demonstrated by the parish's outreaches and ministries particularly to the poor. So much so, that it is this aspect of mission which down the years has given the church its identity. Perhaps that is the best test of our parish wellness. "Are we serving the Gospel by seeking out the lost sheep?"

Amen+

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