

03/19/2017

“Compassion: Nothing + Loss = Rejoicing in Heaven” © - Rev. Seth Jones

Scripture: Luke 15:1-32

On this third Sunday of Lent, we hear that there is great rejoicing in Heaven when even one who is lost is found. I have a sense that a big part of rejoicing is laughter, and that one of the signals that we are tasting something of life with God and Christ is uninhibited laughter.

And so today, we begin with loss. Our parables all have something that is lost – a sheep that has been separated from its community, a woman who has lost something of great personal value, and a man who has lost his identity and a father who has lost his son. Loss is a constant presence in our lives, and it hurts the most when we lose our community, or our personal sense of worth or value, or someone we love, our identity.

As you know, I study the martial art Tai Chi, and one of the primary principles in the success of the martial art is also the most counter-intuitive. It is called “investing in loss”. What it means, in a martial sense, is that when someone attacks, you receive the attack and invest in where the attack is directed. You lose the attack in order to win the fight. In Tai Chi, investing in loss is also where you receive the attacker’s energy. Having invested in losing to the attack, I can now give back to the attacker all the energy that she has given me. It is a very powerful thing to witness.

But when we come to life events – losing our community, our personal worth, our identity – it is very difficult to go with the loss. But look at what the outcomes are in our stories today – Joy, Acceptance, Love, Reunion. So investing in the loss, going with the experience seems to lead to heavenly rejoicing, if we allow Christ to direct the experience.

I believe joy to be a fundamental aspect to compassion and when we are confronted with loss in others, it can be difficult to find openings for the Holy Spirit to lead ourselves and others toward that joy.

If we do not time our compassionate outreach well, or if we feel self-assured in our approach, we can do great harm to the relationship.

One of the ways that works best, but also requires deep sensitivity is humor. And one of the best ways to humor is through jokes. Here is an example of a joke:

Two fish are swimming in a tank. One fish turns to the other and says, “do you know how to drive this thing?”

Many religious traditions understand the value of jokes, because jokes place incongruous things together in unexpected ways. Jokes and funny events are meant, often, to open the mind, expand our understanding in some way. The best example are Zen Koans. These are spiritual jokes meant to zap the meditator out of traditional ways of thinking.

Examples of Koans are:

What is the sound of one hand clapping?

Who were you before you were born?

If all comes from nothing, what are you doing here?

I am of the strong opinion that our parables today are meant in the same way as Zen Koans. They are theological jokes meant to point to God’s joy, and the sheer enjoyment God takes in us when we are fully committed to being with God.

There is a long tradition in the history of the church called the *Risus Paschalis*, or “The Easter Laugh”. The Easter Laugh is the week following Easter where everyone celebrates the Resurrection by telling jokes, playing pranks, and looking for funny and hilarious things in the

world. Think about that for a moment – humor based on the Resurrection. Humor that does not seek to denigrate or diminish others, because as many of you know, in the modern world something is funny if it happens to someone else, but is a tragedy if it happens to you. Resurrection humor seeks to rebuild relationships, to heighten the worth of the individual, and to bring joy to our identification as children of God.

The reason the *Risus Paschalis* was celebrated after Easter is because it celebrates the greatest joke ever played in all of history. It celebrates the great joke God and Christ played on Satan. Sometimes, this is called the Divine Prank, or in more academic terms, Salvation by way of Deception. God deceives Satan, because Satan deceived humankind.

Richard Feynman, the great physicist, loved a good joke. He once said, *The highest forms of understanding are laughter and human compassion*. Aside from suggesting that it was quantum physicist Schrodinger's dog who told Schrodinger to put the cat in the box, Feynman also said that what made a joke funny was not the shock or even the punchline, but the *kick of the discovery*, seeing the new way of seeing things for the first time.

And so, in the very early church, about 370AD, theologians were trying to think of ways to explain Jesus' death on the cross. The idea that took hold and was very popular until it was outlawed by a Pope in the early 1600s was the idea of the great joke against Satan. Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, said in a sermon on the Resurrection, *He who first deceived humanity by the bait of sensual pleasure is himself deceived by the presence of the human form. And whereas the enemy wrought his deception for the ruin of our nature, the wise one used his plan of deception for salvation*. And in another sermon, he said, *For this reason, having swallowed the bait of the flesh, Satan was pierced with the fishhook of deity, and so the dragon was caught with the fishhook, just as it said in the book of Job, 'You shall catch the dragon with a fishhook'.*

The Divine Joke is simply this. Satan tricked Adam and Eve by deceiving them into believing they were only human and material beings. Right after that moment, God set into motion a huge prank on Satan. The rest of the Old Testament are landmines and signs and signals that are clues to us that things are not as they seem, but to Satan are markers that humans are nothing but human. With the arrival of Jesus, there is a glimmer among humanity that they might be more than merely human – they might be divine as well. And so Jesus does what he does to help humanity understand who they truly are, but at the same time makes Satan believe that he, the Son of God, is merely human but deluded. So, Jesus has moments of weakness – in the Garden of Gethsemane, the march to the Cross, and the Cross itself. Jesus becomes a lure, “a worm” – quoting Psalm 22 as he does on the Cross – for catching Satan. Satan goes for it when Jesus suffers his very human and public death on the cross. Jesus allows himself to be swallowed by Satan, in the same way Jonah is swallowed by the whale. In doing so, Satan becomes the agent of his own destruction by bringing the Divine Light of God into the underworld itself. The resurrection is the sign that the great prank has worked and that God through Jesus Christ has overcome death and Satan.

This is one of my very favorite ideas about the Resurrection and the Cross. I love every part of this way of interpreting the story of Christ. All of Scripture can be read in light of it. The idea of Jesus as the lure in a long con against Satan is outrageous and it brings a sense of the hilarious to something we take *so seriously* all the time. And this is also why I think our parables today are meant as divine jokes.

They are outrageous in the extreme. The way the shepherd in the first parable acts is outrageous. This is the furthest thing from a Good Shepherd right here. No shepherd would

allow 99 sheep to be threatened by the wilderness alone with no guardian for the sake of one lost sheep. No one would do this.

The woman who loses her 10th coin is outrageous. What does she do when she finds her silver coin? She throws a party for the entire village. Throwing a huge party for that many people would easily cost far more than the lost silver coin.

Most fathers would be thrilled to see their youngest son return, regardless of where and what he had done. But most fathers are not this outrageous. There is still the fact that the youngest son has spent all his inheritance on alcohol and prostitutes. The son has brought epic shame to the entire family. The older son, who followed all the rules, knows all this. But the father throws a huge party for the return of his son.

Each one of these are outrageous, joyful, and ill-conceived acts of compassion for the one sheep of the flock, the villagers of the town, and the son who has returned.

But what if these were the norm? What if this sort of outrageous, divinely hilarious behavior was normal for those of us who have chosen to follow the greatest joke player who ever lived? What if tragic events in our own lives and in the lives of others were met with the search for the hidden joy within them, met with the reminder of the *risus paschalis*, the *Easter Laugh*?

I don't pretend we are capable of this in the face of death and despair and broken communities where violence, drugs, and abuse are daily occurrences, where targeted drone strikes kill families, where tsunamis and hurricanes destroy entire villages.

God's love, though, is a thoroughly outrageous thing. The whole story of Jesus' work for us is crazy. Nothing in our parables today is normal behavior. Oh, the losses are normal. There are people in this very church who are trying to find new community after the destruction of an old community. Some of you may be a lone sheep separated from the rest of the flock. There are people in this very church who have saved, and then lost everything because the bank foreclosed on their family home, losing not only the value of your personal wealth, but your value as a person in the process. Some of you may be holding the single coin that was lost among the cobwebs of a corner of that home. There are people in this church who have lost children to horrible circumstances, situations to which death might have been the greater blessing. As parents, who we are, our identity, is wrapped tightly with the one who has disappeared. The return of that one would be an outrageous, crazy, blessing.

The thing about the great joke, the divine conspiracy against Satan, is that so many things are not as they seem when seen from this perspective. All of scripture becomes a treasure hunt for what God has hidden within what we think is before. Our very lives become a cascade of signals and signs for what God may have in store for us at any given moment. For me, when I look at the world and the story God and Jesus are telling us, I have more compassion for those around me, and for my own experience. Knowing that outrageous acts of love are possible, that God does things that no one else does – brings the possibility of love and even laughter to light.

We live these incongruous, sometimes unconnected lives that seek unity. In God's way, things come together in outrageous ways. On Pentecost, in Eastern Orthodox churches, you will hear the following in the liturgy of the day:

With divinely-wise bait thou didst hook the author of evil, the dragon of the deep, binding him in Tartarus (the underworld) with the bonds of darkness.

In Christ, there is no longer any fear of death or the destruction of the soul. In Christ, the community is restored upon your return such that even the angels rejoice. In Christ, your worth and value as an individual is so great that it is worth throwing a party for the whole neighborhood.

Even though you may have spent every gift you have been given, run your body through the worst sorts of behavior, and rejected your entire family, in Christ, your return is worthy of a great welcome, a great banquet. In that sense, you and I are the great punchline to the world's greatest joke. But it is a punchline not made at our expense; it is a punchline made for our, and Heaven's greater joy.

How does Paul put it? Doesn't he say in 1 Corinthians 17,

Two ducks were sitting in a pond. One of the ducks said, "Quack!"

The other duck looked at his friend and said, "Hey! I was going to say that."

No, but really. Paul says the punchline to the great cosmic prank in Romans 8. There he says, *³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Amen.