

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19 – Exodus 32:7-14, Psalm 51:1-11, 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

September 15, 2019 - The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony

“And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.” God changed God’s mind. That is astounding and not how we think of God at all. God is unchanging, God is. And that is true. Yet we have the words in Exodus, God changed God’s mind.

Midrash as you may know is the centuries old commentary on the Hebrew Bible. Written over time by countless rabbis, Midrash seeks to explain the ways of God as found in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. It builds, on itself as succeeding generations study the scripture, what has been written before and their current situation.

What is going on? According to at least one rabbi, what we have here is the intermingling of God’s anger and God’s love. This intermingling plays out in a way that humans recognize in their own experience of the balance between anger and love.

A bit of background. Moses has led the people out of slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the wilderness to Sinai. They are following God, in the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They have Moses as their guide and shepherd. It has been a difficult journey so far and the people have tested God, crying out for bread, meat and water. God has answered their every complaint, providing manna, quails and water from a rock. What God has required of them is simply that they follow, that they have no other gods. God has asked only that they let go of the gods of Egypt as they left behind the slavery of that place. It is harder than one would think.

The wilderness is a fearsome place, a desolate place. While the people have the cloud, the fire and Moses, they can overcome their anxiety and trust God. When they arrive at Sinai, Moses tells them that God has called him to go to the mountaintop and that he will be gone forty days. According to the rabbi’s, what Moses failed to tell them that he would also be gone the 40<sup>th</sup> night. Forty days is a long, long time when one is anxious and fearful. And so, they wait, they gather manna, they become more and more worried. They imagine all kinds of things that might have gone wrong. All kinds of terrible things that might have happened to Moses on whom they depend. When Moses does not appear when they believe he should, at dawn on the 40<sup>th</sup> day, they do what we so often do when we are anxious, they take matters into their own hands. They ask Aaron to create for them a god, the golden calf. They feel vulnerable and they seek false security. The idol is made, they dance around it and worship. And God who sees all, sees this and God is very angry. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them;’” God is going to destroy the people of Israel entirely. “...and of you (Moses) I will make a great nation.” God is going to destroy what he has created and start over again, creating a new people, more malleable, more obedient, more cooperative. A new people for Moses to lead into the Promised Land.

Fierce anger often leads to the desire to destroy, to cast out, to be rid of. God was passionate about this people who he had led from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land. When they failed to live up to God's commandment to have no other gods, God's first response is to abandon the people, to destroy them utterly.

The impulse to cast out, abandon, destroy, when fierce anger arises, is the cause everything from war to road rage. It is the impulse to protect what is challenged and threatened by purging that which is seen as the enemy.

I am imagining what might have happened had God acted on God's first impulse, destroying the Israelites and creating a new people. If God had done so, I imagine that the same thing might have happened again in a slightly different way. I imagine this because the root cause of the betrayal by the people was not transformed. That root cause was fear. Fear that led to a lack of trust in the one who had led them so far and who had met their needs time and time again.

But, instead, Moses was able to face God and remind God of a different way of seeing things. "Turn from your fierce wrath, change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants,..." Remember not the immediate past offense but the whole history of the relationship between God and the people. In remembering the good in the relationship God's wrath cooled and God changed God's mind. God remembered what was good about the people God had created and why God loved them with a love more fierce than anger. God changed God's mind. Love changed God's mind.

The essence of this change of mind in God was forgiveness. God forgave the people for what they had done that had so angered God. For that is what forgiveness is, a change of mind, a change of heart.

The capacity to forgiveness is a strange and wonderful gift God has given us. It is a gift that grows out of God's love for us. The ability to forgive grows out of our choosing to love as God loves. Not with our emotions but as a choice, an action. Forgiveness, odd as it might seem, is something one does for oneself. It is not dependent on another's remorse, another's willingness to make restitution. Forgiveness is not dependent on another's willingness to accept the forgiveness we offer.

When we forgive, we open ourselves to God's grace. We get "unstuck" and no longer need to hold the anger or plot ways of "getting even". We no longer have to wish that things were different or convince ourselves of the validity of our position.

Forgiveness is a strange and wonderful gift of God because it is one of the few things in life that we have control over. Forgiveness is a choice, at least in the beginning it is a seed we plant which if nurtured can lead beyond a simple change of mind and heart to a change in the way we live our lives.

We come to the two parables in Luke's gospel today. They are parables about taking the risk to love and the result of that risk to love.

The shepherd left the 99 sheep to search for the one who was lost. The one who was lost may have well been lost because of actions taken that were bad choices or the sheep might have been lost through no fault of her own. But lost that sheep was. The shepherd took a great risk, in leaving the 99 to search for the one. It was not a rational choice, yet love, the shepherds love for the sheep and God's love for us is not a rational choice. For God the rational choice might have been to destroy the people and start over with a new community. For the shepherd the rational choice was to keep protecting the 99 and let the 1 who was lost suffer the consequences. But to do so would not have brought the joy and rejoicing that finding what was lost brings.

These parables are about something more, more than the risk of love and the result of taking that risk. These parables are also about who is in and who is out. The issue of who belonged was an issue for Jesus and for the early church. It has been an issue down through the centuries to our very day. Heretics after all are those who are out and Orthodoxy is the side that is in.

Jesus in his ministry continually confronts the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes, in other words the religious leaders, those who are part of the establishment. And, the people who flock to Jesus tend to be the widows, orphans, poor and ill. Those who in that day were out. And Jesus continually chooses to go after the ones who are lost. Just like the sheep and the coin in the parable, Jesus leaves the 99 who are the establishment and seeks out the one to bring that one back into the community. And there is much joy and rejoicing when this happens. There is forgiveness in the best sense the sense of a restored relationship.

When there is conflict, there is loss. A loss of relationship, a loss of peace, a loss of ease, a loss of joy. When conflict is healed by forgiveness there is joy and peace for oneself at least, and by the grace of God for the one forgiven. It is not easy to forgive when we believe we have been harmed. It is not easy to forgive when someone we love has experienced harm. Yet, it can be done with prayer, with thought, with a change of mind.

When Moses went down the mountain, he had work to do. He too was angry and broke the tablets of commandments. He expressed God's anger and then he forgave the people and continued to lead them toward the promised land. I would like to tell you that the people learned their lesson and never again strayed. I'd like to tell you that but it would not be true. The Israelites continued to test and challenge God and to require God's forgiveness. We, too, continue to test and challenge God and one another and we too continue to be called to forgive and be forgiven. It is in forgiving ourselves and one another that we are most like Jesus.