

Exodus 32:7-14  
Psalm 51:1-11  
1 Timothy 1:12-17  
Luke 15:1-10

Proper 19C  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
September 11, 2022  
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### U-Turns

Shortly after we parted in May, I began a road trip that took me south, down the coast as far as San Diego, east along Route 66 through Arizona to New Mexico, then to Manzanar and up the Eastern Sierra, to Mount Shasta, back to the Oregon coast and ultimately back home for a few days before leaving for 2 months in Hawai'i. I didn't actually know it would be two months, but that's a story for another day.

I started counting the u-turns after the first half dozen or so. With most of them, I wasn't really lost, I'd just gone maybe a block too far, or missed the turn or realized I was going the opposite direction of the little blue line on my phone. Sometimes Siri sent me in the wrong direction. More than once I'd forgotten my glasses, or water bottle or my hat. Sometimes it was because I'd glimpsed something I wanted a better look at. All in all, I made something over 60 u-turns in the course of my sabbatical. That was a lot of turning around – that's what repentance means, you know, turning around. I can say, that in every instance I found my way, whether it was to the place I'd planned on, or the place God's grace took me. As it turns out, God is much better at finding us than we are at getting lost.

It's not just the sheep and the coin that got lost today. The story of the Israelites and their golden calf is the story of a whole people getting lost and found. Moses had been up on Mt Sinai waiting for God to finish talking so he could go back down the mountain with the stone tablets. God apparently had a lot to say because the people who were waiting for Moses to return, not only got tired of waiting, they assumed he wasn't coming back. And if Moses wasn't coming back, maybe God wasn't coming back either. What to do? Make a new god! Well, as you heard, that made the God of absolutely everything really angry. "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are." God said. "Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you, Moses, I will make a great nation." But Moses remembered God's promise to Abraham, the promise that Abraham was to be the father of the great nation. He knew God was faithful and he knew God was love and he knew God would keep God's promises, so he called God into question.

Wait. What? We're not supposed to call God into question! God is God. We are not. Who are we to question God's ways? Actually, who are we not to? So many important people in the bible did, and when they did, God often changed God's mind. That's what happened in this story today. It's also what happened when God wanted to destroy Sodom & Gomorrah for their inhospitable ways. But Abraham convinced God not to destroy the city if there were even 50

righteous people there. He ultimately talked God down to saving the city if there were even only 5 righteous people, but the point is, Abraham questioned God, and God changed God's mind.

Jonah questioned God too. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" God said. And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth, even the king who proclaimed "All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows," the king said? "God may relent and change God's mind." And that's exactly what God did. God changed God's mind and did not destroy Ninevah. And my favorite – the Syrophenician woman who begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter, only to have Jesus tell her the children of Israel had to be fed first and it wasn't fair to give the children's food to the dogs. Her brilliant reply - 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'<sup>1</sup> changed Jesus' mind and her daughter was healed.

We think we're not supposed to question God, or even God's "representatives." A woman I met, a beautiful, faithful, generations long Hawaiian was told by her pastor that she was not to question God or the church. That she was to abandon her beloved history, myths and legends and live only in the white Christian world of the church's making. He told her that she was to abandon everything that had been beautiful and sacred and holy to her ancestors, that she was to abandon the ancient wisdom so carefully passed down through the generations, that she was to abandon who she was. It broke my heart, and I could only say to her that calling God into question, or perhaps just questioning our interpretation of God, is essential, especially when the God we're encountering doesn't seem to be the God of love. God IS love – Aloha e Kekua – so when that's not what we're experiencing, we need to start asking questions. Yes, God is God and we are not. But wrestling and questioning and doubting and wondering are all important ways of being in relationship with God. Questioning – both God and her understanding of God – opened her heart to the whole of her beautiful self. She knows the whole of her has been found by the God who is love, and I think there must be great joy and rejoicing in heaven.

We love lost and found stories, don't we? I think we love them because we know the heartache and emptiness of being lost just as we know the relief and joy of being found. And I think we love them because what they seem to be saying is that God will go to any lengths to find us and bring us back into the fold. Knowing ourselves to be so loved by God that God would leave everyone else just to come and find us, knowing ourselves to be so loved by God that God would stay up all night, move all the furniture and crawl around in the dark just to find us – well, that feels really good. It's hard to imagine we're important or worthy or special enough for God to spend that kind of time and energy on us. But if what Jesus says is true, that is something the stories tell us... No wonder we love them.

These tiny parables are so rich... listen again to the beginning...

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." This

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 7:28

wasn't the first time the Pharisees had openly criticized Jesus for spending his time with the wrong sort of people. But this time he'd gone too far - now he was eating with them! Jesus is messing with the law, the very core of Jewish life, and the scribes and Pharisees don't seem to be nearly as interested in God's extravagant love as they are in the rules.

But we have to remember that the Pharisees were the good guys, the ones who held themselves to the highest of standards, who devoted their entire lives to perfecting their religious practices. They walked the walk, didn't just talk the talk. Pharisees attempted to live their lives in strict compliance with every aspect of Jewish law, and they thought the way to inspire everybody else to do that was to hold them to those high standards too. Of course they were grumbling about the company Jesus was keeping. We can understand that I'm sure. There's an awful lot of grumbling – to put it mildly – in our society today. And why? Because we don't like who people want to associate with. Whether that's Democrats or Republicans or Christian Nationalists or Quakers, or Fox News or Rachel Maddow watchers. These people don't want to associate with those people, no matter who those people are. Maybe we can relate to the Pharisees.

*All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

*So Jesus told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?..."*

Which one of you? We assume that the shepherd and the sweeping woman are stand-ins for God, yes? But I'm not sure that's what Jesus is saying. Which one of YOU, he says to the scribes and Pharisees, which one of you will go to such lengths to find the ones who are lost? I wonder if Jesus wants them to see themselves as the extravagantly loving shepherd and the careful and tenacious sweeping woman? I wonder if that's what Jesus wants for us too?

What is lost that God is calling us to find? Who is lost and needs to be found? Whether it's hungry people or immigrants and detainees, kids on the streets or elders in nursing homes, whether it's a planet in crisis or people on the other side of the aisle ... what or who needs to be found? And who will do the finding if we don't? It isn't just being found that feels so good, you know. When the finder finds what she's looking for, she throws a party, she's so happy. And I think God is happy too... not because a sinner has corrected a moral failing, but because a sinner – one who has separated herself from God – has been welcomed back into the fold. That's really what repentance is all about. Not being sorry and guilty and ashamed for wrongs done. Repentance means turn around, whether that's a u-turn or turning around and around. However you turn, turning around doesn't mean correcting your character failings so much as it means finding a new view. It means you see that you belong in the community you're a part of and see that you are a precious part of God's great story. And that, Jesus tells us, brings great joy and rejoicing in heaven. Amen.