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Compassion and Forgiveness

Sermon, Pentecost 16, Proper 19-C, September 12, 2010

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

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Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28, Psalm 14, 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

We all make mistakes. We all sin; we all miss the mark. We try and we fail. We do what we think is right and then realize our point of view is too narrow. We make decisions based on wrong or faulty information; we put ourselves first.

It is so difficult for us to set aside our own wills, to comprehend the will of God. It is impossible much of the time. But once in a while we get it right, we see a glimmer of light. This is the “finding of the lost coin,” a time of rejoicing.

Sin is anything that is a barrier to God. It doesn't matter if I have sinned, or been sinned against, or another has sinned. All these form a barrier to our fully expressing and realizing the love of God for ourselves, others, and the world. It is like a brick wall, enclosing us and cutting us off from others. When we sin we are in darkness and alone. Even the little bitty sins shut us off from others and from their love.

This is really a matter of consciousness. I'm not talking about the big sins like stealing or murder, but the little niggling moments when we fall back into selfishness, forget generosity or forget tolerance. It is the flash of irritation when I see my husband's socks on the floor instead of in the laundry basket, or get stuck in the checkout line behind a mother with a screaming child. It is that instantaneous change in consciousness from my being a loving person being aware of the love of others and the interconnectedness of all life to someone who is old, tired and irritated. That is what forms the wall.

It is forgiveness that breaks down this brick wall, forgiveness and compassion. We need to let go of our judgments, of our need to be right. Learn to love the other person without necessarily condoning their behavior. This is the root of compassion. Many times that person is doing the best they know how even though I, from my perspective of vastly superior knowledge and wisdom, know exactly what they should have done! (grin) When I am filled with my own righteousness, there is no room for God. Make room for some doubt and some humility. Crack open the bricks and let in the light. We all need to be a little cracked, because it is the cracks let in the light.

In his latest letter in the Messenger,¹ Bishop Adams quoted our Diocesan Vision Statement: “to be the passionate presence of Christ for one another and the world we are called to serve.” He goes on to say, “To be the passionate presence of Christ is about the formation of our hearts and minds. It is about the interior life of prayer where we take on more and more the mind of Christ as a people of compassion and hope.” “[Our mission to one another and the world] is the outward manifestation of hearts and minds [which are] formed in Christ as we reach out to the poor and powerless, the disenfranchised and the least. [This] is where we find Christ and give ourselves away.”

¹ The Diocesan newsletter is published twice a month. To subscribe, go to the Diocesan web site cny.anglican.org, and on the home page scroll down to News. There you will find a link to subscribe to the Messenger. It is free and emailed to you on publication.

This invitation to radical discipleship involves self-abandonment: giving all of ourselves over to Christ to follow the Will of God; integration of all parts of our lives into a single whole that is pointed unerringly toward Christ; and allowing complete immersion in the knowledge and love of God. This is the light and hope of the Gospel. This is the hope that we will find the lost coin, because without hope we would not search.

According to the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus said, “The kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the children of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.”²

That poverty of spirit is what we experience behind the brick wall, when we are closed in on ourselves. We are cut off from the love and compassion of others and of God. Also that poverty of spirit extends beyond us contaminating and impoverishing all those around us. It is like a disease. When another person is caught up in a selfish or belittling attitude, it is human nature to climb on their bandwagon and join their parade. This is the root of rumor, the joy of passing along the bad news, of joining others in scapegoating and beating up the underdog. In extreme form, it is the consciousness of a lynch mob. It is much easier to agree with another than stick up for what you know to be right. It requires conscious awareness and ongoing self-knowledge to resist the negative emotion of another or worse, of a crowd.³

The Love of God is all around us, inside us, extending throughout the universe, at once immeasurably huge and yet within the smallest spaces. Nothing exists without Him. God is in the sky above us, in the oceans, in the earth. It is only our sinfulness that is the barrier that prevents us from being fully aware of this. Our job, our responsibility, is to try to live in that consciousness as much as possible. Of course, we will forget, but then we will remember, forget, and remember, forget and remember. That is how we learn; that is life.

Again from the Gospel of Thomas, “Jesus said, ‘It is I who am the light which is above all. It is I who am the All. From me did the All come forth, and unto me did the All extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up a stone, and you will find me.’”⁴

Jesus, the immortal and invisible, is right here, right now: in every sliver of wood, under every stone, in every moment, in every atom. He is here. He is here.

And now to Him whose Power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.⁵

² The Gospel of Thomas, verse 3

³ for further reading see the work of the 20th century French philosopher René Girard, especially *The Scapegoat*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986, or *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2001.

⁴ *ibid*, verse 77

⁵ Ephesians 3:20-21