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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
September 15, 2013, The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary 24)
Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-11; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

I struggled some this week trying to figure out how the story of the golden calf in Exodus fit in with the two parables that Jesus tells about the lost sheep and the lost coin. And then suddenly it dawned on me. Besides, and perhaps undergirding, the theme of repentance that runs through all of our readings today – there is the matter of the significance of earnestly listening to and treasuring the Word of God.

This explains why we come to church, in the end. We may have many reasons for attending worship on a regular basis. Certainly it is a good thing for the people of God to do. Plus, we have become a part of this worshiping community and enjoy being together week after week. But beyond that, it is a crucial thing to do for when we do not give our attention to the Word of God regularly and habitually we poor sinners have a strong tendency to forget, to doubt, and to wander away and get lost in the mire of all the other words and ideas that surround us and take over our thoughts and even rise up from within us.

My husband likes to recall a seminary conversation with our great teacher, theologian Robert W. Jenson. So, this conversation took place quite a while ago, back at the Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary. Greg was exploring the teaching of the New Testament and the Lutheran Confessions that faith produces good works. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount:

Even so every good tree brings forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit. (Matthew 7:17)

And as St. James says:

Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. (James 2:17, KJV)

Greg's question was a simple one: If faith produces good works, why are there so few good works on earth?

Jenson answered by taking his stand with the Bible. He said that good works do indeed follow from faith. The problem, he said, is not whether faith produces good works, but rather whether we can keep faith alive in our lives. This is a daily challenge for us, Jenson said, because we are tempted to stop listening to the Gospel and instead to start listening to a thousand other voices speaking us to us in this world.

What is needed is practice and discipline in listening to the Word of God. The word of television is easy to hear. The word of the newspaper is easy to hear. The word of fashion and the latest trends is easy to hear. What we need to work at is removing ourselves from the voices of the world and trying instead to listen to God.

For if we will listen to God, then we will be better people. Like day following from night, if we listen to God with focus, prayer, and good will, we will have a chance to surprise the world with goodness.

(This is a good time for me to put in a plug for the *Lectio Divina* sessions that Pastor Kelly Ray Merritt is leading on the second Sunday of each month. These sessions provide a unique opportunity to learn a very prayerful practice or discipline of listening to the holy Word of God.)

Israel and the Golden Calf

Today's readings begin with the example of the people of Israel camped out in the wilderness while their spiritual leader, Moses, goes up on the mountain to talk with the Lord. He was up there for a long time. So long that they wondered whether something had happened to him. The people became increasingly restless during his absence and started to press Aaron, who Moses had left in charge, to supply some physical/visual way that they might once again have access to God.

Instead of calming them down and reassuring them – even reminding them of the things that the Lord had done for them in bringing them out of slavery in Egypt and all God had promised through Moses, Aaron capitulates and begins to collect golden earrings and such. Rather than repeating the Lord's Words and deeds in order to sustain the community in Moses' absence, Aaron makes them an idol that they might have something to address and worship.

The conversation that ensues between Moses and the Lord has a familiar tone to parents who are unhappy with a child's behavior! God says to Moses,

“Go down; for **your** people, whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves...”

Moses answers,

“O Lord, why does thy wrath burn hot against [**your**] people, whom [**you**] have brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?”

Finally Moses **reminds God** of the promises **HE** made to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and the Lord changes his mind about consuming them with the fury of his wrath and starting all over again with Moses! You see how powerful God’s Word is!

Listening to Jesus

¹**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to [listen to] him.** Jesus often said this: “Anyone who has ears to hear, listen!” Numerous times he calls people to listen to his words. Listening – really listening – takes effort. It requires quieting our own minds so that we might really hear what the other person is saying.

There is a method of communication that can be used between two people to help them listen better to each other. Some time ago Greg and I went to a workshop to learn this method so that we might be able to use it in our own relationship as well as teach it to others. It was a workshop for married couples to help them improve their communication with each other – and thereby improve their relationship.

The method involves a card upon which is written, “the floor.” One person has the floor and can speak. The other person listens carefully and then repeats back what the first person has said, either word for word or rephrasing it. The first person listens and decides whether they feel they have been heard correctly, or not. If so, they give “the floor” to the other person so they can respond. If not, they repeat what they have said, maybe in another way or clarifying what they mean. It goes back and forth like that until the one with “the floor” is satisfied that they have been heard.

Greg and I tried this out with a coach. It seemed awkward because it really slowed down the conversation. But, at the same time, it enabled us to **really listen** to each other and to really feel that we were being understood.

Jesus wants to be understood too! He continually calls us to listen to him! Here, as we gather in worship, we must let Jesus have “the floor.” Let us be attentive listeners to the Word of God. That Word is available to us when we read our Bible and here in the church. But if we are tired or distracted with worldly things, it is possible for our eyes to glide over the text and for us to fail to appreciate the magnificence of God and his love toward us. We should work at trying to be more mindful in our reading and listening. We do not want to stand unmoved before the Word of God. Above all, let us seek that we will practice that most noble form of listening: the listening that takes concrete shape in the form of new and better deeds and more confidence in the face of life’s troubles. Altogether, we want to fall into that blessed camp of people who having ears, do indeed listen.

Now, notice who are coming near to listen to him! Tax collectors and sinners! They wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. They were the ones obeying his call, “anyone who has ears to hear, listen!” The Pharisees and scribes are critical. They are also listening to Jesus but with an ear to finding fault. They have their agenda! They do not open their hearts and minds to really hear him – they are searching for something they can use against him. But instead of using something that Jesus says, they use what he does. “This man receives sinners and eats with them!” Thus they criticize him for the company he keeps.

Notice how Jesus responds! He tells two stories – two parables. In the first one, Jesus asks them to imagine themselves in the position of a shepherd. Well, you and I don’t know many shepherds, I suspect. And even if we did they probably wouldn’t be the type of people they were back in Jesus’ day. If the Pharisees and scribes were to make a list of those whom they call “sinners,” shepherds would definitely be on that list! They were dirty, smelly, and they moved their flocks without regard for property boundaries, so that they sometimes seemed like squatters or people who disregarded property rights. In any case, for Jesus to invite the scribes and Pharisees to put themselves in the shepherd’s shoes – well that would have been a stretch.

Then he asks them to imagine being a woman! Oh my goodness! The Pharisees were the type of people who would pray to God each day, “I thank you, Lord, that you did not make me a woman!” Really! And yet Jesus wants them to put themselves in her shoes.

To do that – to put oneself in another’s shoes – to imagine what it would be like to be them – that is what we call compassion. To feel with someone else – to join them in whatever it is they are feeling. When we really listen to one another that is what we do – we begin to understand, at least a little bit, what they are feeling and

experiencing. To be understood in this way is to be loved. So what Jesus is asking of the Pharisees and scribes is at least to open themselves up to the experience of shepherds and women – those who are considered to be beneath them - lowly outcasts and sinners. And to have compassion for them, as he does. Jesus asks no less from us. Not only are we to carefully listen to Him and understand Him, we are to listen to one another with compassion and understanding.

But then Jesus goes on. He uses these lowly examples as a window into heaven and the extraordinary love of God. So the shepherd who is willing to leave behind 99 sheep in order to seek out and find the one who had wandered off and got lost – that Shepherd is like God! That one little lost sheep is important – it's precious! And when it is found, the shepherd calls together all his friends and neighbors and they have a party to celebrate!

Same for the woman and her lost coin. She goes to all that work, sweeping diligently every speck of the house until the coin is found. And then, has a big party to celebrate!

Even so, when we fail to listen – fail to keep our focus and attention on our Lord's Word – and so wander away and get lost, there is no telling what ends our Lord will go to in order to **find us and bring us back safely** into the fold. And when he does, all of heaven rejoices!

Indeed, our Lord was willing even to come to earth –to be born of a woman in a lowly stable – to go about calling the lost sheep to himself, eating with outcasts and sinners – whoever has ears to hear, listen! Indeed, Jesus was even willing to be nailed to a cross – these are the lengths to which our Lord was willing to go rather than lose a single one of us. How incredibly, unbelievably precious we are!

And having been found, we are invited to celebrate at this table – to join in the heavenly banquet, invited by our Lord Jesus to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.