

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 12, 2010
Luke 15:1-10
The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and Redeemer. Amen.

I have great respect for the monastic tradition. I admire those in contemplative life. I admire women and men for whom silence is part of their daily lives in ways that most of us can only imagine. I admire the Sisters of St. Anne in Arlington or the Dominican Nuns in North Gilford, CT. who only leave their cloister to visit a doctor or a dentist. I admire those monastic communities in the desert of Egypt, those who live a truly contemplative, isolated and meager life.

As much as I admire those who live such austere and committed religious lives, I believe that they, just like most of us, struggle with *listening* for God's voice in daily life. Don't they, don't we struggle as we long to hear God's voice in and throughout life?

I believe many of us have the perception that we have to get away from it all to be in a position to hear God's voice. We might even say to ourselves, "Oh, if I could just get away for an extended silent retreat, I could reconnect with myself and with God." Others of us might say, "Oh, time spent in contemplative prayer would be just what the doctor ordered for me to be more in tune with God's grace in my life." And others of us might say, "Oh, I have only to look inward to see the darkness of my life, the silent darkness of my life, and see in my need for God's forgiveness and wholeness, the very presence of God alive in my heart."

The tax collectors and sinners in today's gospel must surely have connected with some sense of the darkness of their lives to have wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. We know about the dreaded tax collectors, despised by just about everyone and for many good reasons. Apparently tax collectors of Jesus' day skimmed from the top of what they collected in ways that enabled them to be fairly well off in first century society.

The 'other sinners' in the first century were not just ordinary sinners. They were considered 'known' sinners. They were the prostitutes of the day, the known adulterers, or those whose occupations caused them to work outside the laws that governed Jewish culture.

These two groups of people were very different from the presumed righteous Pharisees and scribes who tried to live good and holy lives. So, what was there about Jesus that compelled the tax collectors and sinners to want to listen to what he had to say? How did they 'fit the bill' of the accusation leveled at Jesus, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"?

Figuratively speaking, Jesus was on trial in the eyes of the Pharisees, the scribes and Roman officials. His actions and his words screamed loudly about the man of justice whose actions and words spoke volumes about what he believed and who he believed deserved to hear the Word of God spoken in their midst.

Who do we believe deserves to hear the Word of God spoken in their midst. Who do we *really* want to feast with us at this Table of Life? Let's think about that.

If the pastor of the church in Florida who finally found the wisdom to turn away from burning copies of the Quran walked in today, what would our reaction be? If we lived along the border of Arizona and saw illegal immigrants flowing across the border and into our church, dirty and disheveled, what would our reaction be? What would our reaction be if a newly released Muslim prisoner from Guantanamo Bay walked in to join us for Eucharist some Sunday? Are not these people and others just as worthy as we are to hear the message of the gospel?

We gather on this Sunday as we do every year to celebrate the gifts of this community committed to the gospel. We gather after the summer months in which many of us have been away. We gather in anticipation of the various programs that will fuel our spiritual energy as a community of believers.

We gather because we long to hear God's voice not just in our Eucharistic celebration but in committee meetings, serving others in outreach ministry or in Christian education programs for children, youth and adults. God is present in all these things just as God is present on the dock of a quiet lake up north, in the sounds of children at play on an ocean beach or the cry of a loon in the early morning hours of dawn.

You see: We don't have to retreat to a monastery or a remote lake to hear God's voice. We don't have to go somewhere else to be in communion with God. We only have to stop and listen. In the silence of our hearts, God speaks to us, the rich, the poor, the tax collector, the illegal immigrant, the pastor in Florida, the former Muslim prisoner longing to build a new life.

We gather today as Church eager to be more than we are as individuals. We gather to build new life together. We gather as Church anticipating the excitement of a new year. We gather because who knows what God has in store for us in this place, through this ministry, during these upcoming months together, as we seek to fulfill God's purpose in our lives?

Like Paul, I am "grateful to Christ Jesus who has strengthened me" for this journey. Like Paul, we are grateful that we have received mercy and grace overflowing for us "with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Like Paul, we come to offer ourselves. No matter what station in life, no matter where we are in our faith journey, we offer all that we are and all that we can be in gratitude to God for all that we have been given and will be given.

We long to give back what we have received. We believe like Francis of Assisi that "It is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life." We experience a glimpse of that life every time we gather to hear God's Word and to feast at the Eucharist of Life.

To the "immortal, invisible, the only god, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."