

SLD09.16.07 24<sup>th</sup> Ordinary  
Emory Presbyterian Church  
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28  
Luke 15: 1-10  
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### **“Our Searching God” (II)**

Clearly, in our first reading this morning, God is displeased with God's people. Worse than displeased; according to Jeremiah, God has *had* it. **“For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, skilled in doing evil but clueless how to do good.”** God is angry and, in a superior enactment of archetypal Old Testament fury, God's going for divine revenge.

Hot wind coming out of the desert? It's coming from God, and it's meant to do harm. War, famine, chaos in creation? – God's making the whole land a desolation. Though not *quite* destroying it, you'll notice. Don't know if you caught it, but God's so mad that nothing tidy like total destruction will do. Oh no, the current appetite of divine rage is more for suffering, torture and slow death.

**“The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.”**

I'm not killing everybody at once, see. I'm going to sort of draw it out and let 'em watch each other squirm.

**“Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black.”**

You've all heard that hell hath no wrath like a spurned woman. Well, I'm here to tell you, heaven hath no wrath like a spurned God!

**“My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent.”**

God's heart is broken and God's pain and fury cannot be contained. Until in the end, today's text finally closes with...no hope.

**“I have spoken. I have purposed. I have not relented nor will I turn back.”**

Of course, God *does* relent, doesn't God. God does eventually (and repeatedly) turn back God's fury, though after today's divine temper tantrum, Israel and we might have doubted God would ever recant. And really, God doesn't. Recant, that is. Though God's people never finally deliver, God never stops wanting what God wants. But for reasons beyond my understanding, God keeps bouncing back from divine fury, keeps giving us another shot, keeps hoping it'll turn out differently. I don't know. Myself, I would have given up long ago. But that God....

You remember how last week God had Jeremiah to “break the jug in the sight of the people” to remind us how God has the power to break us?

**Thus says the Lord of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended!”** (Jer. 19:10-11)

Well, Jeremiah did that because the vessel God the Potter had been making of the clay (which, of course, is God's creation, including us), that vessel had flat spoiled in God's hand. But then God *reworks* that clay into another vessel, one that is more satisfying to God. (Jer 18:4) It's what God does.

**“Thus says the Lord: just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand!”** *(Wayne starts handing out bags of clay – ushers help – saying - Go on - take this chunk of clay and think about how God's trying to mold you.)*

So this is how Jeremiah's God is: ever trying to mold, and form, and re-form God's people into God's image and hope and intention - whatever it takes - but never

finally giving up. Sometimes God's molding seems gentle enough, like mushing a piece of clay into a shape. Other times it feels more like...a shattering beyond mending. But always God keeps going after God's beloved ones, nudging or leading or whippin' 'em into shape – until they can find their way home, which is, of course, in the heart of God.

Take today's Gospel lesson from Luke 15 for example. Jesus is on the road just down from Galilee, on his way to Jerusalem, and all these people start gathering around him – mostly so-called "sinners...and tax collectors" – in other words, the generally despised and avoided ones. But also in the crowd are these other little clusters of higher-end humans – the scribes and Pharisees – who are generally more acceptable, and accepted, social units. Still, whoever's in the crowd, and whatever they do, or have done, Jesus pretty much welcomes them all.

Only the crowd doesn't feel all that accepting toward each other. Everybody wants to hear what Jesus has to say, but not necessarily in each other's company. In fact, the observation that Jesus welcomes the great unwashed on equal footing with the socially elite is in itself rather unsettling, at least to the Pharisees. And not only does Jesus welcome the gathered undesirables, from time to time he actually sits down to *eat* with them.

Now, this really *is* going too far. Perhaps even more than today, in Jesus' day choice of with whom to eat was a serious matter of social politics. Sharing table hospitality with those beneath one's social, economic or religious status was generally considered not just inappropriate, but rather bordering on irresponsible, and certainly an insult to those who shared your rank. I mean, the righteous and the sinners just aren't supposed to mix!

Which is why the scribes and Pharisee are grumbling:

**(choir) “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!”**

This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them! Not good. The righteous mixing with the sinners. Not good at all. ‘Course you remember that last week Jesus ate with the Pharisees, which didn’t make them any happier. But mixing known sinners with the verifiably righteous? That’s just a bad idea.

For that matter, the hoi polloi might not feel all that comfortable about it, either. Only they’re just that hungry to hear something besides “get lost,” so they don’t let the Pharisees run them off.

So here’s Jesus surrounded by this crowd of tax collectors and other miscellaneous scuzz, peppered here and there with gaggles of grumpy Pharisees, and he lifts his voice and he asks:

### **Luke 15:4b-7**

‘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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

Reckon who Jesus is mostly talking to. Reckon why he chooses to tell these particular parables to this particular mixed bunch of listeners. Who’s he targeting? Who’s he teaching? Who does he want to be sure and hear what he’s saying?

Remember, these are all folks suckled and raised on Jeremiah’s ferocious God, as was Jesus. Just what exactly is Jesus trying to say? And to whom?

These are familiar parables to us; they might have been to that crowd, too. You’ve got your (probably good) shepherd tending his one hundred sheep when one

wanders off and he goes looking for it, finds it, and happily brings it home, celebrating his good fortune with his friends. Reckon the shepherd is God? Reckon he's Jesus? And the sheep – they follow the shepherd – are they meant to represent Jesus' disciples? Could be.

And the ones who stick around, are they the good ones? The good disciples? The ones who know the rules and follow the commandments and “do the right thing?” We often assume so. The scribes and Pharisees probably assume so. Probably so does the majority caucus of local scuzz. And certainly Jesus never disabuses them of that notion. He just never really says.

Meanwhile, one of the sheep wanders off. Sheep do that. You already know my opinion of sheep. If you are a sheep, you wanna be around Jesus, not around me.

Anyway, off the sheep wanders. Off the shepherd goes after it. He doesn't sound mad or anything; doesn't judge or condemn the sheep - just sort of rolls his eyes and grabs his staff and lumbers off after the ovine errant, and brings it on home. In fact, the only emotion the shepherd ever exhibits in this tale is his pure-d delight at finding the durn sheep in the first place. Myself, I think the shepherd is simple, maybe simple as the sheep.

But wait a minute ...the shepherd's God, isn't he. And the wandering sheep? Well, likely some kind of sinner, don't you think? Some sad somebody who's wandered away from God? But then, which of the people listening to Jesus would that be, the scribes or the scuzz? He never actually says. All Jesus says is that the shepherd gets pretty jacked whenever he finds a wandering one, *whoever* it might be. Certainly the

opinion of the other sheep as to who's wandered the furthest doesn't seem to count for much.

Anyway, just as the crowd is scratching their heads over that one, Jesus asks another question:

**Luke 15:8-10.**

'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Okay, so not everybody's a guy and not everybody relates to shepherds, so here Jesus offers an appropriate gender balancing parable about a woman - myself I'm thinking a peri-menopausal woman around 54 years old - who somehow misplaces a full tenth of her wealth, and then proceeds to scour her home from top to bottom until she finds it.

Now God as a woman, I can go for that. But the coins...now the disciples are coins? And the good ones stay put and the bad ones roll? Sinners as rolling coins? I don't know. If the question is meant to be about who's a sinner and who's not, as far as I can see, the whole metaphor's getting a bit stretched.

So maybe it's not. Maybe Jesus isn't so much talking about sinners as he is trying to shift peoples' sin-ranking attention away from each other and toward *God's* relationship toward those who wander (which would be all of us?). You know, so maybe we could follow *God's* lead?

And God's lead, at least in the arena of wandering sheep and rolling coins and other errant miscreants, is simply and steadfastly and persistently to go after the wandering ones, find them, and then get sort of silly with joy.

So I guess this is how Jesus' God is, as well: ever seeking to mold, and form, and re-form us into God's image and hope and intention for us - whatever it takes - but never finally giving up. Sometimes God's molding seems gentle enough, like mushing clay into a shape. Other times it feels more like...a shattering beyond mending. But always God pursues God's beloved ones, forever trying to nudge or lead or break us into shape – until God can bring us home, which is, of course, in the heart of God.

“Bold as a lion you hunt me,” cries Job (10:16). “You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways,” declares the Psalmist. (Ps 139) “If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle in the farthest limits of the seas, even there your hand shall lead me.”

Forever pursuing the one who is lost, that's our God. Forever seeking the one who wanders from the path, or slips through the cracks, until She finds the one she seeks. Oh, and then what great joy!

Whether throwing up his hands in divine histrionics, or anxiously lighting a lamp to search for our bad selves, God remains passionately engaged, insistently in love, and absolutely determined to “get us” in the end. In fact, I'd say there's not a trick in the Book our searching God won't use to grab our errant attention. Caressing us through the hands of those we love, challenging us through the edges of our relationships, speaking to us through preaching and study of the Word, soothing, delighting, startling us with the ever-

changing rhythms of nature, God persistently seeks us out, trying to engage us and move us closer home.

No wonder when one of us actually pays attention, when one of us, for even just an instant, actually attends, not to the sins of another, but to the possibilities of the divine presence in our own lives, the angels get so goofy with joy. For, as Frederick Buechner writes, when the Kingdom really comes, it's as if the thing you lost and thought you'd never find again is...you. To the glory of God. Amen.