

Message: "God's Reverse Valuation Principle"

Scripture Lesson: Luke 15:1-10

15Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3So he told them this parable: 4"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? 5When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6And 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.' 7Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8"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? 9When 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.' 10Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

A mother was standing in line at the grocery store, a few dollars in hand. She leaned against her shopping cart, an aura of burden shadowing her posture. She was buying milk and diapers and eggs, some soup and bread and other basics for meals as her toddler daughter squirmed in the grocery cart containing the items. The cashier rang up the bill, she handed him the money, and he said, "I'm sorry, you're six dollars short." The mother stared blankly at the man, then looked down at the cart, as if she needed to decide which was more needed, the diapers or the milk. There were no other options, as she had only what was in her hands to pay. After a somewhat uncomfortable silence, a voice behind her said, "Put it on my card," and stretched out his arm with a credit card in hand. The cashier did a double-take, as did the mother; the cashier then took the card, saying, "I'll put six dollars on this." "No," said the man, "Put it all on there. Put the entire bill on there." The cashier glanced at him for a second, and said, "are you sure? The bill is fifty eight dollars....." The man said, "Yes, put it all on there." The cashier slightly shook his head in something between disbelief and uncertainty; the woman shook her head as if to say "I don't know what to say" to the man; and the man just smiled slightly, grateful that in some very small way he was able to practice the art of sharing joy.

Things like this do happen, and they happen more regularly than I think we realize, where the checks and balances of common sense are put on hold for the sake of someone in need, when we take hold of an opportunity to exercise unusual grace so desperately needed by the world. Grocery bills aside, there are so very many ways in which life is enhanced when we refuse to be confined by the conventional wisdom that seems to make the most sense in our world, but often leaves us lacking. Sometimes, it is the exceeding of conventional wisdom that makes room for the miraculous.

Take, for instance, the counsel of Jesus, in today's parable quips. God advocates leaving the ninety-nine for the sake of the one; God is in favor of sweeping the entire house in search of one small coin; God raises the roof over the one and the small in celebration when they are found, expending an inordinate amount of celebration over what a reasonable person would discount.

But then, God never claimed to be reasonable.

In fact, God's pretty ridiculous, if you think about it. God takes unreasonable risks, God doesn't play fair, God is imbalanced in his approach to the truth. God's economy is backwards, his policy is upside down, his practice is counter-productive. God reverses logic, upends common-sense, and casts serious doubts upon assumed societal values. He values the one over the ninety-nine; he gives full effort to the recovery of a pittance in the world's eyes.

But it works. It works better than many if not most of the human constructs we have created to dominate and control each other and this world around us. It works because all the unreasonableness, all the counter-productivity, all the reverse logic employed by God is skewed towards the favor of us lost human beings. Lost in the sense of understanding what's truly valuable in life, what matters eternally, what brings meaning into life, what makes life worth living in the first place. Without a sense of who made us and how we are made and why we are here, life is reduced to existing rather than living; without a sense of life's preciousness, it becomes just another commodity in a superficial world. And life is so much more than a worldly commodity.

A teacher begins her week by going shopping for her new class. She has been with them a week, and already recognizes some things that might help individual students have a more productive year, so she seeks to buy items that would better meet their particular learning proclivities. She brings no voucher to the store, no school credit card, no way of paying for what she purchases save her own personal cash; there are no school funds for purchasing individualized items for learning. But she has learned it is worth paying for such things herself, in that the particular notepad, the unusual book cover, the favorite snack, the personalized name plate, the softer lighting, and the unique literature might just make the difference for Joe, or Kaitlyn, or Emily, or Matthew, or Isabelle, or Jeremy. Spending significant personal finances on many such things that make her work as a teacher more effective might seem unreasonable, but not to her, for the goal is too great to short-change. Young lives need such additional attention to thrive.

If you think about it, it is often the unreasonable things that make life more worthy of living. It is the extra attention, the excessive care, the unexpected pleasantries, the deeper sacrifices that make life a precious, meaningful thing. There is a reason that most of our heroes exceeded "normal" parameters in working towards their goals - from Mother Theresa to Malala Yousafzai, from Gandhi to Oscar Romero, from Bonhoeffer to John Lewis - all stand out because of their willingness to exceed convention and speak truth to power, to speak right against wrong, to stand for good opposing evil, to give of themselves beyond the measure of sensible living. It was and is their unreasonableness that made the impossible, possible.

So it is with God. So does God invite us to practice our lives, to live out our faith. It certainly may sound unreasonable to count as equally valuable each and every life; it may sound completely untenable to speak to every aspect of injustice; it may sound impossible to pay the amount of particular attention those around us may require for life to become more complete, more whole, especially when considering those who appear less loveable, more hostile, and most unreasonable themselves. But we will not really know until we try; and until we try, risking much that goes against the grain of the world, we will never understand the practical implications of grace. For grace gives before counting the cost, grace takes on the burden of another by choice, grace forgives even when the transgression is horrific, grace seeks the good of another before self. But grace is God's manner with us all; and by practicing it ourselves, we move more directly into the presence of God.

You cannot know God, if you do not practice grace.