

“Extravagant salvation”

September 16, 2007

Text: 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

I.

One of the things suggested in this reading from Luke is that, when the conditions are right, God loves a party. So, when are the conditions right?

What events ... or happenings ... what human enterprise or labor is so **extraordinary** that they are worthy of God’s celebration?

Some notable events come to mind ...

1. Moses liberating the Israelites from the hand of the oppressive Pharaoh and crossing the Red Sea. That would be cause for God to celebrate.
2. And later, the giving of the Law to Moses at the holy mountain, Mount Sinai.
3. And of course, the birth of Jesus, along with his many healings and teachings; and the gradual birth of the Church in the afterglow of the Easter experience. All of this, further cause for God to celebrate.
4. And then, the dedication and devotion of the Apostle Paul and Peter and the other apostles in shaping the early Church.

Think about things that bring joy to the Almighty ... to the One and Holy God ... the One who breathed life into the likes of you and me!

- Certainly, the triumph of good over evil ...
- And the victory of love over indifference and forgiveness over hard-heartedness.

What would bring profound joy to the God of the universe?

- The elimination of war, for sure—and not at some politically convenient point in the future, but today ... and, of course, the ongoing march towards world peace.
- Kindness, too, comes to mind ... along with goodness of heart, and generosity of spirit ...
- And finally, attending to the poor in the grip of their daily struggle ... alleviating poverty. Feeding the hungry, healing the sick, binding up the wounded, welcoming the abandoned and the desolate. All, cause for God’s celebration.

II.

However, according to our biblical readings this morning, what gives God tremendous cause for joy and celebration is when one of us who is lost is found.

When one sinner repents and turns toward God. What God celebrates is the *lost sheep* who is rescued ... and the *lost coin* that is found. What God celebrates, with unbridled joy, is the lost son—the *prodigal son*—who turns from his sinful ways and returns to his waiting father.

This my son was lost, but now he is found.

THAT makes God happy. And THAT is cause for a party. In the Parable, of course, they kill the fatted calf (saved for only the most special of occasions) and throw an extravagant party.

What God celebrates is the triumph of *amazing grace*. This *amazing grace* clearly gets our attention, too. It's no coincidence that the hymn by that name (which we just sang) remains the all-time most popular Christian hymn.

For most of us, the language of the hymn is personal.

*Amazing grace ... how sweet the sound ... that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found ... was blind but now I see.*

Those are the words. It's that first verse. Those words just grab us ... and they grab us all the more when we remember that the hymn, by John Newton, is autobiographical. One human being's personal struggle with sin ... *and then **grace** comes ...*

The words overflow with humbleness of spirit. Most of us who have lived long enough know that wherever we have arrived in this life, it has been by *grace* ...by the undying, grace of God. The very *grace* that has touched *me*, your pastor, *and you, and you, and you ...and everyone of us.*

We know, and we give thanks.

III.

The triumph of grace in the world is cause for jubilation and celebration. It is joy unmasked. It is joy when all seemed lost. It is Easter forever.

And thanks be to God!

And, friends, what if it's true? What if *grace* really is this powerful? And what if, on the shoulders of this *grace*, God really calls us to an ***extravagant salvation?*** What if?

Middle-ages English mystic, **Julian of Norwich** (1342 – 1416) once gave voice to the following lines ... which over the centuries have become some of the most famous lines in Catholic, theological writing. You wouldn't think it ... because the lines are so simple.

*All will be well, she said.
And all will be well.
And all manner of things will be well.*

As it turns out, **Julian of Norwich** was a die-hard optimist. In an era marked by the rage of the Black Death, and on the shoulders of a series of grievous peasant revolts, Julian was a fervent believer in universal salvation. For her, God's nature and essence overflowed with joy, compassion and love.

Sometimes we may doubt the fundamental goodness of creation and we may wonder about the power of love and mercy in the world; and with good reason.

- Very easily, as with war and mindless acts of terrorism, evil and darkness can seem to win out over goodness and light.
- Very easily, greed and craving for power and control can seem to reign victorious.

But still, after the darkness and horror of crucifixion, on that darkest of Fridays, good news came. Light, that could not be put out, rose up from the ashes of despair. And what if it's true?

What if **Julian of Norwich** is right?

- What if the power of love and grace are so powerful in the world that, in the end, they cannot be defeated?
- What if the joy and the hope of resurrection faith recaptures a flicker of the joy at creation itself—a joy to be realized unmistakably in the last days? What if?
- And what if joy and hope ARE the final truth, affirmations that our faith attests to? And what if an **extravagant salvation** awaits us at the end of our faith journey?

IV.

Understandably, there are doubters. People who are supposedly atheists or agnostics, or sometimes folks like us ... who, from time to time, have our moments. Friends, it's the human situation.

We want to believe, but we wonder. Sometimes the darkness is too much, the emptiness too enduring. We have our moments ... like **Mother Teresa**, for example.

In the cover story of the September 3rd issue of TIME Magazine (Mother Teresa was on the cover), we learned of the stunning revelation of her 50-year crisis of faith ... her prolonged *dark night of the soul*, when God's seems somehow painfully absent.

Imagine, one of the icons of our Christian faith ... in the grip of a wrenching struggle with faith herself. These revelations come from a new book entitled, ***Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light***. The book is a compilation of Mother Teresa's personal correspondence with her confessors and superiors over a period of 66 years.

The letters, preserved against Mother's Teresa's wishes, reveal her sometime intense struggle with faith ... with the apparent *absence of God* ... during periods of what she called *excruciating darkness ... and dryness ... and loneliness ... and torture* (heavy stuff).

Personally, I think these revelations only make her that much more saintly and worthy of our veneration.

Amazingly, through it all, she held on. That's the point. She held on, faithfully, living up to her commitments ... fighting through the darkness, the pain; like Jesus on the cross when all seemed lost: ***My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?***

V.

And what about those of us who move on in our faith, hunkering down with a dogged stubbornness, determined to believe no matter what? At times, we, too, wonder.

Doubting is human ... even healthy. In my preaching over the decades, I've always stressed that a healthy *agnosticism* is good for the life of faith. It wakes us up ... calls things to our attention ... prompts us to keep thinking things through.

Faith without doubt is a lesser faith. The doubting, even the darkness, are springboards to tremendous experiences of divine light and fervent faith.

And the voice of the mystic of the Middle-ages keeps sounding out:

All will be well

And all will be well.

And all manner of things will be well.

Indeed, if the teachings of our faith tradition are true, then joy, hope and love lie at the core of the universe. They thrive in our veins and explode in our impulses because they are *life-bearing* testimonies to universal truth.

It was not unusual for a Christian mystic to exude a towering sense of confidence, optimism and joy in her life. After all, a mystic's life finds its punch in its experiences of God. Again, what if **Julian of Norwich** is right? What if, indeed, *all things are to be well?*

And also—check it out—*what if Jesus knew this?*

VI.

In our Mainline Churches, we don't talk much about salvation. No doubt because, when the sun sets, it's God's domain. Also, for us, it's elusive, even distant. However, if it's our experience that *all will be well*, then salvation comes closer.

Our brief parables from Luke 15 affirm the *wellness* of creation. *All will be well* because what has been lost is found. What has been lacking in wholeness, what has been incomplete, is now complete and whole once again.

Why? Because God's grace is alive and active. It is *well* in its unifying drive to draw all things back to God.

For the desperate shepherd who found his lost sheep ... for the determined woman who found her lost coin ... and for the waiting father whose lost son came home, God's party goes on. It cannot be held back.

God's **extravagant salvation** comes on the wings of God's infinite mercy and grace. And it comes, out of whatever darkness ... lostness ... emptiness ... loneliness ... poverty or despair—even out of, what seems to be, the very absence of God.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound! How sweet, indeed!

*I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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