

Sermon Proper 20 Year C

[RCL] Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

God is Good, All the Time

There is a wonderful scene in C.S. Lewis's famous novel *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* where Lucy, the youngest the children to cross into the magical world of Narnia, converses with Mr. Beaver. In this magical land of talking animals and evil queens, Lucy feels both wonder and fear after hearing about Aslan, the original Lion King, who rules over the lands of Narnia. Lucy inquires of Mr. Beaver, "Is he quite safe?" to which the industrious rodent replies with an air of indignation "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe! But he's good."

Much like Lucy wants to know that the ruler of her mystical realm of Narnia is safe, we want our God and our faith to be safe and comforting, making no great demands of our time or treasure. But if we pay close attention to our Gospel for today, we quickly realize that Jesus is far from safe, but is always good and full of surprises.

Jesus had been traveling around Jerusalem, preaching God's realm, healing the sick, curing the infirm, raising the dead, and generally stepping on the toes of the good religious leaders around Jerusalem. The Scribes and Pharisees grumbled about his dinner companions being less that savory characters, but instead of answering their criticism Jesus told a series of Parables:

A man had one hundred sheep. One wandered off, got itself lost and the man, leaving the ninety-nine hunts high and low for the lost sheep. When he finds the sheep, he gathers his friends and rejoices. God is not safe, but is always good and seeks us even when we wander.

A woman had ten silver coins. One mysteriously disappears, so she lights a lamp and turns her house upside down until she finds it. When she finds the coin she throws a party with all her friends, costing more than the coin's worth. God is not safe, but is always good and finds a reason to celebrate.

A father had two sons. One demands his inheritance while his father is still very much alive, runs off to the city and squanders his money. Realizing the error in his ways, he heads home. His father seeing him far off welcomes him

home and throws a party to celebrate the miraculous return of his presumed dead son. But his older brother, faithful, generous, and devout wanted none of it. "This son of mine that was dead is now alive, the one who was lost is now found," says the father. God is not safe, but is always good and forgives even when we cannot.

A dishonest manager is about to be fired for misappropriation of company funds. Because he doesn't want to do manual labor and is too proud to ask for charity, he goes around to all the vendors who owe his employer money and reduces his portion of their commission and cuts their interest rates. He does this so that they would be hospitable to him when he loses his job. He transforms a terrible situation into one that benefits him and others. In doing this, he actually builds relationships with the vendors instead of simply collecting bills and commissions. Surprisingly the employer commends the manager for his shrewdness, his initiative and his wisdom in business. God is not safe, but is always good, full of surprises and turns our world upside-down.

This is not what many of the religious people of Jesus' day signed up for and neither did we. We want a God who is just and fair. We want a God who is predictable and follows the rule of law. But instead, what Jesus points to is the realm of a God who seeks the wanderer, celebrates the lost, forgives the proud and repairs broken relationships. This is a God who is certainly not safe but is always good.

Throughout the Bible, and particularly in today's Gospel about the shrewd steward, we are confronted with a God who takes our norms, our expectations, our perceptions and our preconceived notions and turn them on their heads. Jesus praises the manager's insanely irresponsible behavior and exhorts us to act more like the manager!

Can you imagine if we, as a church, followed that advice? Can you imagine if we imitated God's goodness instead of being safe?

What if, as a community of faith, we chose to offer forgiveness, love, and welcome to anyone without conditions or requirements?

What if we welcomed everyone to feed from the richness of Christ's table?

What if we shared the joy of our worship, fellowship, and companionship outside the walls of our church?

What if we became agents of love and mercy in our community?

What if we lived as people of resurrection in a Good Friday world?

What if we stopped worrying about what is safe and started doing what is good?

How would our church be different? How would our worship be different? How would our relationships be different?

Jesus invited his hearers to step out in faith and to see an outrageously generous God squander that generosity on each and every one of us. Are we not called to do the same? It will certainly not be safe, but is good and God is good!

As followers of Jesus this is the God we proclaim.

We proclaim a God who is always ready to overturn our understandings and widen our circles. Our society often prizes safety over welcome, fear over compassion, division over unity. We are sometimes too often willing to sacrifice love, compassion, and caring on the altar of safety. But God insistently and consistently points towards the good, and good is not always safe.

Jesus in his life and ministry chose always to do the good at the risk of being safe.

Safe says, "Stick to what you know." Good replies, "Put out into deep waters. Imagine the possibilities."

Safe says, "Follow the rule of law." Good replies, "Seek compassion and mercy."

Safe says, "Keep score. Hold grudges." Good replies, "Love your neighbor. Forgive."

Safe says, "Worry about yourself" Good replies, "Consider the lilies of the field, the birds of the air."

Safe says, "Take care of our own." Good replies, "Just as you do to the least of these you do to me."

Safe says, "Come down and we will believe." Good replies, "Forgive them, they know not what they do."

Safe says, "King of the Jews." Good whispers, "Resurrection!"

Safe is tempting, but good is eternal.

The Good News for us is that we follow in the footsteps of Jesus the good-doer. Those footsteps may lead us to places we may never dream or imagine we would go, but we go risking and knowing that God always walks with us, always forgives us, always love us.

God is good, all the time.

All the time, God is good!

Amen.

Written by The Rev. Deon Johnson. Johnson has served as Rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Brighton MI for the last nine years. A liturgical consultant, Johnson specializes in helping communities revision their worship spaces to better reflect both their needs and the theology of welcome found in the Eucharist. In his spare time, he enjoys working on websites and is an avid photographer.

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