



**September 16, 2007**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

## “Our Reckless God”

I attended seminary with a woman who later served as a District Superintendent in Central Illinois. She has a strong personality, a loving and compassionate heart, and fantastic preaching skills. She also has a habit of signing her letters with a special flair, using words that intrigue me. At the end of her letters, rather than closing with “sincerely yours” or “your friend” or even “your sister in Christ” or “in Christ’s love”----- she often closes with these words: “grace and tumult”.

Grace and tumult. Those words sum up a lot of what I experience in life. Grace and tumult. The surprising, unearned love and wonder of the sacred beauty within and around us—GRACE---- grace greets me in every day if I have eyes, ears and heart tuned to recognize it. And TUMULT. I don’t have to try very hard to recognize tumult in my life; tumult around me, tumult within me—it’s never very far away.

My friend’s way of signing her letters seems to suggest, however, that this is not only the way life often is--- filled with grace and tumult--- but perhaps the way life is **supposed** to be.

Today’s Scripture lesson from Luke’s gospel presents two parables about God’s search for the lost. There is great comfort in these stories. They convey the depth of God’s love for us, the lengths to which God will go for us. But, as I study and reflect on these parables, I find their message brings me both grace and tumult. And my heart murmurs this is probably exactly as it should be.

Rev. Leonard Sweet, United Methodist pastor and author has provided some insight about this:

*Many Americans breathed a sigh of relief when convicted serial murderer Jeffrey Dahmer was himself murdered by a fellow prison inmate. As reports of Dahmer's life since his imprisonment filled the news, how many of us cringed versus how many of us cheered upon learning that Dahmer had "found Christ", been baptized, and felt some peace in his heart as a result? It was, strangely, hard news to hear for a lot of us who call ourselves Christians.*

Then Sweet cuts to the heart of the matter: *But who needs the message of God's love and redemption more than these? Christ did not die to save only "nice people" or those who are just a "little bad". Christ came to offer repentance and forgiveness to all who ask and to all who receive him and his Word. It is the completely lost sheep, the totally disappeared coin, that sets the searcher on an all-out discovery mission.*

These two parables about God seeking and finding lost ones bring us comfort when we find OURSELVES in need of being sought, brought back to our community with rejoicing, cleansed and forgiven of wrongs that weigh upon us like lead. The message of these parables brings us TUMULT when we consider OTHER PEOPLE—and how reckless and radical God's action is.

A clergy friend of mine shared with me a story from his own life. An indigent young man found himself in town and in need of food and shelter. He went to my friend's church, where he found the door open, but the church offices dark and tightly locked. He did find the pastor's home phone number, however, and made a call to see if the pastor might be able to help. My friend was just sitting down to dinner when he received the call. Somewhat reluctantly, he went to the church to meet with the young man.

Upon learning of the man's need for food and lodging, he rummaged in the office, looking for vouchers that would allow him to eat at a local restaurant. He couldn't locate them, so he drove to a fast food restaurant and bought dinner for the young man. He apologized, saying that normally he could offer to drive him on to the next town, but his evening schedule wouldn't allow him the time. The young man was thankful, courteous and polite, saying he much appreciated what the pastor was able to do.

My friend was haunted by this incident. He ended up telling the story in a sermon—on Jesus' teachings regarding banquet etiquette for hosts and guests. You may remember that Scripture, which teaches we are to invite folks who CANNOT

REPAY us to our dinners, rather than our friends, family members and those with status and power. In his sermon my friend said, “When I received that phone call, THE HAM WAS ON THE TABLE FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE! Why didn’t I bring him home?”

After preaching that day, my friend was confronted by a number of his parishioners. “I’ve never been so confused by a sermon in my life!” one gentleman moaned. A woman who had served a term as county sheriff charged over to him and spoke vehemently: “You NEVER, NEVER let people like that into your house. YOU STAY AWAY FROM THEM! DON’T YOU KNOW HOW DANGEROUS THEY ARE?” Well, there was, I guess, not too much grace and quite a lot of tumult for my friend in his church that day.

What is the answer? Should he have brought the young man home? Isn’t that reckless? What do the two parables from Luke show us? We have to acknowledge the parables show a God who is pretty reckless. God is DETERMINED, even OBSESSED, it seems, with finding the lost ones.

The numbers 100 and 10 (the sheep and the coins, respectively) are symbolic numbers in Middle Eastern tradition. They represent COMPLETENESS. This completeness is IMPORTANT. This completeness is something God wants. This completeness can only be achieved when ALL are brought together. God will not accept ANY being left out.

Look at the behavior of the ones who represent God in Jesus’ stories. The shepherd leaves everything else on hold, leaving the 99 sheep WITH LIMITED PROTECTION, to throw himself into the search for the lost sheep. The woman tears everything apart in her house in search of that one lost coin. God, represented by the shepherd and the woman, will go to GREAT LENGTHS to bring all people back to his heart.

What does this mean for us, in the midst of the grace and tumult of each day? First, we are to ask a vital question: Who is missing? Who is left out? Who do we need to find and draw in, in order to achieve the completeness God intends—so we’ll be a group of 100, rather than 99—to be two full hands of 10 rather than only 9. We need to ask this question in our neighborhoods, our social lives, our schools, as well as in our churches. God will not accept ANY being left out. As God’s instruments of DIVINE GRACE, as Christ’s AMBASSADORS, we must follow God’s lead.

As to being reckless, there are ways God can be reckless that we may not be called to undertake ourselves--- not individually, anyway. But as a church--- as a group---

as a community of faith, we probably should be a lot more reckless than we are. We prefer to keep our churches filled with “decent people”. But I know God calls us to do TWO THINGS--- we need policies and procedures that protect our family of faith. AND AT THE SAME TIME we need to be open to ALL people in our church community. This will mean doing some things that may be hard for us, on occasion.

As we wrestle with this, let’s remember that first Scripture we heard today. In this letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul expresses his deep gratitude for God’s mercy, which brought him into the Body of Christ. Remember Paul himself was responsible for the EXECUTION and DEATH of early Christians! How radical it must have felt to the members of the Christian community who opened their doors, homes and hearts to this convert!

So, what do you think? Should my friend have taken the indigent young man home for dinner? I have concluded that each man and woman has to find the answer within. No one can say for another. But today’s readings from our Sacred Writings tell me that we MUST wrestle with this QUESTION when it comes up in our lives, taking it very seriously, seeking the Holy Spirit’s help. We must wrestle with the ways God asks us to be a part of his reckless grace- even though that wrestling brings us great tumult.

Following Christ is not a boring, sweet or “nice” activity. Following Christ is an ADVENTURE—which always comes with some risk and tumult. We need to accept that tumult, along with the welcome grace that blesses our days.

Friends, we worship a reckless God. That reality will bring us grace and tumult. May we accept each with the knowledge that we are loved and cherished by the One who will not rest until all the lost have been found. AMEN.