

Sermon 16 Pentecost Year C September 16, 2010 by Ron Kolanowski

Today's readings give us a mixed message about God. The first reading from Jeremiah focuses squarely on God's judgment against God's people. Jeremiah is recording the effects of God's wrath on the people of Judah in the last days of its existence as an independent political entity and the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. But I choose to reflect on the other two readings this morning.

The following two readings focus on judgment but from the perspective of God's outrageous mercy and forgiveness. The two parables from the gospel demonstrate the lengths God will go to seek out those who are lost and the untold joy that God feels when God finds one who is lost. God's Mercy and ability to forgive know no bounds. Even though the shepherd has many sheep the care and concern for the lost one takes priority. The same is true in the parable of the lost coin; the owner does not rest until that coin is found.

1 Timothy echoes these parables. This passage is meant to reflect Paul's reaction to his encounter of the risen Christ. Paul, as portrayed, considers himself "foremost" among sinners not just because he failed to keep the law, but because he was *"a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence"*. In short, the apostle Paul was guilty of hate crimes. Even though Paul acted out of ignorance, he remains astonished that God through Christ would actively seek him out. God's love for him "overflowed". He finds it to be extravagant, immeasurable — one might call it God's preferential option for God's very opponents. Here, one can see how Christ's message of love one's enemies is experienced by Paul.

Themes of repentance, atonement and forgiveness are prevalent in all three of the Abrahamic faiths this week. For Christians this week's parables and the parables that follow for the next few weeks, for Jews it is the High Holy Days and for Muslims it is the month of Ramadan.

We might take note that Christ reached out to Paul and abundantly showered his forgiveness and mercy upon him even though Paul perpetrated hate crimes. Hate crimes are on the rise in our "civilized society."

Consider, in Gainesville, Florida---yesterday a small faith community made world headlines with its promise to burn Qurans on what they promoted as international burn a Quran day as a way to protest Islam and the attacks on 9/11. This act of hate had only one outcome---increased acts of hate and violence not only at home but around the world as it is carried by television and the internet.

This planned action by the Dove World outreach center and its pastor Terry Jones prompted me to do some thinking about the Quran. What I discovered is that there are 4121 citations in the Quran on Allah's forgiveness and another 4341 citations heralding Allah's bountiful mercy. In our own Hebrew and Christian scriptures there are 160 references to forgiveness and 239 references to mercy.

In Sura 30 verse 50 from the Quran it says, *Then contemplate (O man!) the tokens of Allah's Mercy! how He gives life to the earth after its death: verily the Same will give life to the men who are dead: for He has power over all things.*

The translation for the word Islam and Muslim literally means submission to God. To be a Muslim is to submit one's own will to the will of God and ask for Divine forgiveness. Allah states I forgive the sins of one who repents even if the sins are [the size of] mountains. When Allah is so forgiving in ordinary times then during Ramadan His mercy must **shower** down. Fortunate are those who take advantage of His mercy and His forgiveness. There is still time to seek His mercy and forgiveness. When a person turns to Him in absolute humility then Allah states no one is as merciful as I am. Allah says I am Merciful and Compassionate but man continues to wrong his soul and does not ask for forgiveness. In the Hadith (teachings of The Prophet) whenever a person 'walks' towards Allah, Allah runs to him.

I also reflected on the month of Ramadan which ended on September 9. During Ramadan the believers get busy seeking Allah's mercy, forgiveness, and protection from Hellfire. This is the month for renewing their commitment and re-establishing their relationship with our Creator. It is the season for goodness and virtues when righteousness blossoms throughout the Muslim communities. "In many ways the themes during this holy month are very much in keeping with the Christian season of Lent and also with the Jewish feast of Yom Kippur that will be celebrated at the end of the High Holy Days of Judaism on September 16.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement is the holiest day of the year for Jews. Its central themes are atonement and repentance. Jews traditionally observe this holy day with a 25-hour period of fasting and intensive prayer, often spending most of the day in synagogue services.

The evening and day of Yom Kippur are set aside for public and private petitions and confessions of guilt. At the end of Yom Kippur, one considers one's self absolved by God.

Our gospel today, is a clear reminder that God seeks each one of us out in spite of our getting lost over and over again. God rejoices when we return and extends forgiveness and mercy beyond anything we can ask or imagine.

This idea of God's extravagant forgiveness is shared by the three great Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. If we believe so strongly in the abundance of God's mercy, why is it that we find it so difficult to extend forgiveness to others?

My invitation to you and to myself this week is to reflect on those situations or individuals that we find difficult to forgive...and to recognize that in my inability to let go and truly forgive that I'm the one who loses out. I lose the opportunities for a new relationship or new life to emerge. Let us pray.

God, you know how often we in your human family lose our way. You know that we find it difficult to move on when we feel slighted or someone has hurt us. But at those times when we become lost we know you are there extending your mercy and forgiveness to us. Help us to forgive others as well as ourselves for those times when we have become lost. We cannot do this by ourselves, but only through your grace and abundant mercy....mercy that we don't deserve by anything we have done or not done, but mercy granted by a love that none of us in whatever language we speak, in whatever name we call you,... can begin to understand. We are so small and helpless, like a lost sheep or a lost coin, we need to be sought after and found. God as you seek us out in our times of loss, help us to reach out to those we have hurt or who have hurt us and begin again through your grace to seek new life that we might build up your kingdom here on earth. We ask this through your Son who came to demonstrate how much you love and care for us. Amen.