

(Un)Limited Love
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 11, 2016
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Texts: Jeremiah 4.11-12, 22-28;
 Psalm 14;
 1 Timothy 1.12-17;
 Luke 15.1-10

These early weeks of September seem to carry with them the feeling of a fresh start and a new beginning. Even if you are not in any direct way connected to the start of school the feeling is still in the air. It's a part of our church life. Today is Kick-Off Sunday when we begin worshipping in two services again, education programs begin, and small groups reunite after a summer hiatus. Everybody comes back together into some new rhythms of life and worship and discipleship together.

Part of what I love about the new beginning feeling of early fall (and we get another chance with the new year) is the psychic and spiritual space to start again. If this last season was a hard one you get to turn the page and start all over. I suspect most of us (all of us) at many different places along the journey of our faith and life need that opportunity to have a marking place where we turn a corner and leave some piece of struggle or suffering behind us and walk into some light and a new day.

Maybe that is where you are sitting this very day. You are eager for a new start; maybe even truth be told a bit desperate for one. Maybe you have been struggling lately with a part of your life that has begun to unravel. Or maybe it is someone you love who is just lost and you cannot reach them. As you listen to this text from Luke today about the religious elite who are looking down their self-righteous noses at Jesus for the company he keeps, you breathe a big sigh of relief that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them because then maybe there just might be a place at this table Jesus sets before us - a place for you and for me and for the ones that we love. After all the ones who are weak and weary, rejected and broken are the very ones Jesus seeks out as friends.

In the parable he shares today Jesus makes clear that he does this because God does this. God is like the fool for a shepherd who in having 100 sheep leaves the 99 unprotected to go out and seek the one that was lost. If you are in the business of shepherding for the purpose of economic gain, let's just say this would not be listed under "best practices." God is like the woman having 10 silver coins who upon losing one lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until she finds it.

When God finds that one who was lost, the heavens themselves erupt in rejoicing. Remember who this parable is told for? It's for the self-righteous who were looking down their noses at the ones they deemed as unworthy and whom God values beyond measure. This text and the one from 1 Timothy speak to us of God's heart and orientation toward us. At the very moment when we feel like we are barely holding on to a thread of that cord that binds God's heart to ours - that is when God extends to us the utmost patience and reaches out to us with a fool hardy kind of love. I wouldn't mind stopping right there to just simply bask in that unlimited love that is being revealed to us in these texts

But that isn't all the texts we have before us today and isn't the only picture we have of God's heart. Sometimes our struggling and our lost-ness comes from our own wrong-headed, stubborn, foolish, mean-spirited choices. Let's just be honest here. The picture I painted a moment ago of a person who is struggling and barely holding on to the thread of the cord that connects God's heart to ours is the image of a person who is oriented toward God and desperately trying to hang on. That isn't the only kind of struggle and lost-ness that exists - right?

Jeremiah offers up a very different scenario. This time the cord that connects God's heart to the heart of God's people is being strained because God's people are charging full speed away from God in the opposite direction. It's more like a tug of war than a desperate hanging on. And the image here in Jeremiah 4 is of the cord that has been stretched so far for so long that it has been reduced to one single fragile thread that simply breaks as Israel for the hundredth time refuses to be found. The rage that pours forth from the heart of God at the breaking of this thread is frightening; not

unlike the rage Jesus unleashes when he takes cords and turns them into a whip and starts turning over tables in the temple.

A couple of weeks ago I made the case that the judgment of God as we hear it in the prophets or when Jesus steps into his prophetic mode as he does throughout his ministry is for the sake of turning us around and purifying our hearts like a refiner's fire. Did you hear Jeremiah today? "A hot wind comes...toward my poor people, not to winnow and cleanse – a wind too strong for that."¹ There it is – right? Our worst fear that we really can go too far...that the cord really can break....that God's love is limited and we (or ones we love) may just be the ones who find those limits and fall beyond them.

It's really helpful to remember when we come to these texts that the prophet speaks as poet giving voice to the urgency and pathos of God. Abraham Heschel was a brilliant Jewish theologian from the 20th century who made this case that the prophets of God were bringing the pathos of God to the people of Israel and then through them to us.² It's hard for us to swallow when we think of God as omnipotent, and unchanging and majestic. These portraits of God as invested in human history let alone invested in the individual lives and choices of people like ourselves it's hard to hold together. Pastor Gordon did a wonderful job of looking at that dynamic with us last Sunday.

Think about what the word *pathos* means for instance in acting. Pathos is an appeal to the emotions of the audience to elicit feelings that already reside in them. It's a communication technique – a form of rhetoric.³ The prophet captures so well in this passage the excruciating pain that comes from watching someone you love destroy themselves before your very eyes. You only rage like this at ones you love. You would not be moved to this intensity of anger if you did not care.

¹ Jeremiah 4.11-12, NRSV

² You can read an excerpt of his writing on this topic at http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2008/07/pathos-and-prop.html

³ See definitions like <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/pathos>

Hidden in this text that seems to be sketching out the limits of God's love is in fact the promise of God's unlimited love for humankind – for you – for me. It's buried right in the middle of the raging of the text when it says "I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void, and to the heavens, and they had no light."⁴

Does that ring any bells for you? Do you hear the echo from Genesis 1? "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep..."⁵ Sometimes things really do unravel all the way. Sometimes things are broken and will never be put back together in the same way ever again. When you are sitting in that space, it feels like you found the outer limits of God's love. But you haven't. Because even in the utter waste and void where there is no light, we hear in Genesis 1 that the wind from God – in Hebrew the *ruah*, the Spirit of God – sweeps over that space and begins to separate the light from the darkness and creation is born.

This picture from Jeremiah belongs in the gallery that reveals God's unlimited love right alongside this picture from Luke 15

This is God's heart for us.

And that means that today IS a new day, a new chapter, and not because it is the start of school and not because church life is gearing up again.

But because every day is a new beginning.

If you need to be reminded just get up before the dawn and sit outside and watch as the light separates from the darkness and God's daily work of creation and re-creation begins again.

⁴ Jeremiah 4.23, NRSV

⁵ Genesis 1.2, NRSV