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How we develop a relationship with God

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The Peace Pulpit

There is a passage in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah that I have always thought of as a very marvelous, extraordinary way of showing who God is and how God acts in relation to us. This is from the 30th chapter in the Book of Isaiah and it time when the prophet has been preaching to the people, who are threatened with an invasion from the north, not to enter into an alliance with the Egyptians and not to go to war. The prophet is pleading with the people "Seek peace and only peace." But they reject the prophet's message and they go to war. They are defeated, but then the prophet says these extraordinary words, speaking for God: "God is always waiting to be gracious to you. God comes to show you compassion." I have always thought of this as a very beautiful expression of who God is. God is always waiting, waiting to be gracious to us. No matter how we have sinned, rejected God, God is waiting. That is a very reassuring revelation about God.

But if you listen very carefully to the lessons today, you discover that God is even more extraordinary, almost unbelievable. More than simply a God who is waiting to be gracious to us, instead we have in Jesus a God who is running out to seek us out, to find us, to bring us back. This is the kind of God who is revealed in Jesus. We can see, if we listen to the first lesson today, how this is in a sense a new revelation about God, a more complete revelation about God. In that incident from the history of the chosen people, Moses pleaded with God to forgive the people, and God, it seems only after hesitation almost, says yes I will forgive. But now it is so different. You have a God who is like a shepherd, as you heard in the parable. One sheep is lost, 99 are OK, but its that one who is lost and the shepherd leaves all the rest to find the one who needs that shepherd. Of course, Jesus says, this is how God is. The sinner who needs God, God will come and seek you out. Not wait, but come and find you. The same thing about the woman and the 10 silver pieces. She loses one. She spends all her time and energy to do everything she can do to find that one. When she finds it, she rejoices. Again, this is God coming to find the lost one.

In both cases, Jesus says, they have a celebration. They have a banquet. Everyone comes together to rejoice. Of course a banquet like that in scriptures is always a symbol for the reign of God, the heavenly reign of God when everything when all of creation comes into fullness of life. All of us are brought into the fullness of life and it is symbolized by a banquet where there is plenty, more than enough for everyone and everyone rejoices.

That is, again, seen very powerfully in the third parable. We know that parable so well, we often call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but it is probably better described as a parable about the two lost sons and the loving father. Both sons in this parable are lost in sense. The one because through greed he wants to get everything he can get from his father. He wants to take his full estate. But then he goes and squanders it in sinful living. He's lost, so desperate that he is starving to death, even eating the food of pigs and you can imagine how abhorrent that was to the listeners of Jesus who would refuse to eat pork. Yet he has to eat the very food of the pigs. He is totally degraded in the eyes of the people.

The other son, "I have slaved for you." That is how he describes his relationship to his father. But it is so wrong. God doesn't want us to be slaves. To be bound by a set of rules, as if that is how we develop a relationship with God. No. That son is reminded by the father that "Everything that I have is yours and it has always been yours." Everything I have is yours. God is always giving. God isn't demanding that we obey certain rules and be slaves in relationship to God. We are people who God loves as sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. God comes and looks for us. Luke says so clearly, the father was watching and when he saw the son -- he must have been looking every day -- when he saw the son a long way off, he runs to find him and bring him back. That is how God is to us.

In the passage of the letter from Paul to his disciple Timothy, Paul gives us such a marvelous example of this. He says, Look I was a blasphemer, I was a persecutor, I was an enemy of the disciples of Jesus. Then as we know, because it is revealed in other parts of Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus came looking for him and brought him into the group of the disciples. That is God looking for everyone of us.

If we listen to these parables today, we need to adjust, some of us, our understanding of God, because perhaps we have been taught to think of God as a judge who is always watching for us to fail. If we break a rule or a commandment, God is watching ready to judge and condemn. But that isn't the way God is. God only wants us to become the full person that God has made us to be. That is why God wants us to seek out what is good, to seek out how to be a full person, by loving and being loved. That is our relationship with God. Loving God and being loved by God.

Perhaps as we reflect on this, how God loves us and is always seeking us out, it reminds us of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. In a few moments, we will be baptizing the newest member of this community, this tiny baby, we will call him John. That is a reminder to all of us of our baptism and what it means when we are baptized. We become disciples of Jesus, followers of Jesus, followers of his way. We try to be like Jesus was, reaching out in forgiveness and love. In the Sermon on the Mount, which are guidelines for us as disciples of Jesus, there is a very powerful part right at the beginning where Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said of old, love your neighbor, hate your enemy. You've heard that it was said of old thou shalt not kill. But I say to you, you must not even have anger or hatred in your heart. If you know that some one has something against you or if you have something against someone else, even if you are bringing your gift to the altar to worship God, leave your gift, go first and be reconciled. Only then come back and offer your gift. Just as God is seeking us, reaching out to us, welcoming us to the banquet, this Eucharist. So we too must seek out and welcome, draw back and be reconciled.

On this weekend, it is very obvious where we must do this most of all -- to those who attacked our nation on Sept. 11, 2001. We can't be in a situation where we have hatred, anger, resentment in our hearts,

against those who did it. And even more, we can't have hatred, anger, resentment in our hearts against all those who belong to the religion of Islam, anymore than people should hate us Christians for the crimes that we committed throughout history.

God is telling us in the lessons today to be like God, to be one who is seeking out, going to be reconciled, bringing about healing. If we can do that, if we can really be more and more like God, shown to us especially in Jesus and what he taught, then the reign of God will break forth and those celebrations that Jesus talks about in the Gospel will be realized in a way far beyond our imaging. When we enter into a fullness of life and peace and joy that will come when the reign of God happens, and as we begin to live in the ways of the reign of God, loving, forgiving and reconciling, it will begin to happen in our lives even now.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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