

The Rev. Bradley C. Dyche
September 12th, 2010
Luke 15:1-10

Happy New Year, to everyone, Jewish and gentile alike!

On this first Sunday of the Jewish and academic new year, I want to enter the culture wars. No, I am not going to speak about a fundamentalist pastor burning a Quran in Florida, and I am not addressing the planned Cordoba center in Lower Manhattan. I am not talking economics, job losses, or the last single digit anniversary of September 11th, 2001, though I will get to that. Rather, I am speaking about the ordained ministry.

A few weeks ago, in the *New York Times*, on what must have been a slower news day than covering crackpots in Florida, Geoffery McDonald, an ordained UCC minister, wrote an officious op-ed about the challenges and courage of the ordained Christian ministry. I would like to share a portion of what he says. Please note, however, that this is not an exercise in passive-aggression on the part of your Rector. He writes:

“The American clergy is suffering from burnout, several new studies show. And part of the problem, as researchers have observed, is that pastors work too much... But there’s a more fundamental problem that no amount of rest and relaxation can help solve: congregational pressure to forsake one’s highest calling.

The pastoral vocation is to help people grow spiritually, resist their lowest impulses and adopt higher, more compassionate ways. But churchgoers increasingly want pastors to soothe and entertain them. It’s apparent in the theater-style seating and giant projection screens in churches... [here I will point out that I am merely excited about new bathrooms]

... [In my life, he goes on to say, I was told by a committee] to keep my sermons to 10 minutes, tell funny stories and leave people feeling great... The unspoken message in such instructions is clear: give us the comforting, amusing fare we want or we’ll get our spiritual leadership from someone else.

[And here’s the fun part] Congregations that make such demands seem not to realize that most clergy don’t sign up to be soothsayers or entertainers. Pastors believe they’re called to shape lives for the better, and that involves helping people learn to do what’s right in life, even when what’s right is also difficult. When they’re being true to their calling, pastors urge Christians to do the hard work of reconciliation with one another before receiving communion. They lead people to share in the suffering of others, including people they would rather ignore... At their courageous best, clergy lead where people aren’t asking to go, because that’s how the range of issues that concern them expands, and how a holy community gets formed... ”

Now, certainly there are many things in this letter with which I can identify. I do hope that we all work toward reconciliation and holy community. But what I personally, snarkily enjoy, about this clergy scenario is that in said scenario I, as ordained clergy, am noble, and compassionate,

and full of good ideas, while, frankly my dear lay people, you ARE NOT. You need to be edified. I do not. You live in a consumer driven economy, I do not. You are vulnerable to that culture. I am not. Comfort for you should never be your goal in church, but I should be comfortable and not questioned by my ministry. The whole article rings with irony. The man condemns those whom he claims to be trying to help. He exposes his anger in the New York Times, instead of openly communicating with his community one on one (I would love to be at his next vestry meeting). But that's to say, the article makes me sad too, because here is a man with noble ideals who has no idea how to translate those into and with a real community.

Which brings me to our readings. Luke writes, "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' In other words, Jesus has been sitting with people who have consumeristic mentalities. They want the here and now instead of the hereafter. And the Pharisees, like pastor Geoffery MacDonald, are appalled. They too have noble ideals, and they too have trouble translating those ideals into a wider community. They leave people out. So Jesus tells them this parable;" Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" And Jesus then tells another parable about something that is lost and then found, a coin. And he concludes by saying, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons."

Many of us hear this story as though we are the sheep or the coin that is lost with God chasing us, holding God's arms open to us. Amazing Grace: "I once was lost but now am found." And that is amazing. And it is how God works. If you are one who is lost, take comfort that God is searching for you. But also take note that this story was not told to the one lost sheep. It was told to the Pharisees, the 99 sheep, the crowd. It is a story for the crowd which thinks it is safe, and assumes that it is motivated for all the right reasons, perhaps like our dear pastor friend, Pastor MacDonald. And let me enter the culture wars further by claiming that perhaps this is the same as our reaction to that pastor, Terry Jones in Florida, who threatened to burn Qurans. Come come, did we not all feel a little self-righteous in our enlightened selves, as though we ourselves are free from any bigotry and violence, as though we are not engaged in warfare right now, even as I speak.

And that's my point. The Pharisees assumed that they were safe in their ideals, and they knew others to be wrong. They rested in their self-righteousness... not the loving God. But in this parable, the 99 are also vulnerable. They are in the wilderness. All of them are at risk of being devoured and consumed by ravenous predators. They are no better than the one who is lost, except that they have one another. In other words, Jesus asks the Pharisees, "Don't you see. This tax collector. This sinner could be you. This lost sheep might be you. It is you."

We are all in the wilderness together. We are all vulnerable, prone to wander, and needing protection, all needing Grace.

And Jesus knew this about us. He knew that it was easy for us to leave others behind. He knew that we sometimes forget that to leave some behind eventually means that all are left behind. For

Jesus, the good news of God is not about some being righteous while others are lost, not even about saving as many as you can, while the saved rest on their laurels. For Jesus, everyone is in the wilderness, everyone has the ability to wander. And the Good News of God, is that everyone who is lost will be found. And no one will be left behind.

Which brings me to September 11th. I realize that we have, over the past 24 hours and 9 years, been inundated with images and pain. I realize that it is difficult to talk about and think about. Some of us need a break. But, if the culture wars concerning the Cordoba Center in Lower Manhattan speak of anything, it is that we need to be talking, so that our pain and anguish does not come out as intolerance and bigotry.

And so, I want you to imagine that day, not because you want to, but because as a community, we need to. Go back September 11th, 2001. Go back to that beautiful fall, crisp New York day. And see yourself here, in 2010. See the time stretching out before, between now and then. See the subsequent wars, the turmoils, the upheaval. See the people we've lost, and those who have been born. I want you to imagine how we have put our lives back together, and how they have fallen apart.

This, my friends, this time between then and now, is the wilderness. And we are BOTH the lost sheep and the 99 sheep.

Now, imagine God chasing after each of us in that wilderness. The families who still grieve, the workers who get sick, the families of those who hurt us, the children, right now, without education or love, being taught to hate and terrorize, the families who live in war zones right now. The Glenn Becks, the Obamas, me, and you.

Trust that God is searching us all out. Trust that God is like a Mother in an amusement park who has three children running in different directions, bobbing and weaving into crowds.

And trust that we will be found. Trust that the wilderness, though we are in it, is not where we ultimately belong. Despite all that has happened in these nine years, do not cease hoping that the edge of the forest is near and that we will all be there together, someday, in a new year.