

Pentecost 17C, Proper 19.
September 11, 2016. Ex. 32:7-14; Luke 15:1-10

A pastor friend of mine relies on a saying to help her maintain boundaries and focus on what is really her job to do. The saying applies when there's a meltdown going on in your line of sight, but outside of your realm of responsibilities. The saying goes "not my circus, not my monkeys." It's a good saying, especially for people in the caring professions, where it can sometimes feel like any pain, anywhere, is ours to fix. An ability to identify which circuses and monkeys are properly yours can save you from burnout and keep you doing good work in the most appropriate places. But there is one problem with this basically good saying: it gives you no help at the moment when you realize "this is my circus; these are my monkeys."

God delightfully has one of those moments in today's reading from Exodus. God has led the people of Israel out of Egypt, where the enslaved, and is taking them to the promised land under Moses' leadership. But to get there, they have to go through the wilderness and things haven't been going particularly well. After several difficult moments, it looked like God and the people had patched things up when God gave the 10 Commandments and everyone agreed on them, but here we are just a few chapters later and things have gotten very bad indeed. Moses and God have been on top of a mountain together making plans and while Moses has been gone the people have gotten a bit impatient and a little afraid and so they asked Moses' lieutenant, Aaron, to make them new gods to follow.

And so God sees this and is furious and is the first to use a trick that all partnered parents of children have at some point used since. God says to Moses, "*Your* people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt, have acted perversely." My one year old son Isaac doesn't speak English yet, but he already knows that when he's driving me crazy, he is his mother's son; and vice versa. "Jackie, *your* son is trying to put the cat in the trash can; *your* son has thrown his plate across the room because I dared to give him food that wasn't macaroni and cheese.

The humor continue in this story, but does get a bit darker as God asks to be left alone, so that God can cook up a disaster to wipe out the Israelites. Go is done with these folks and is going to wipe the slate clean and start over with Moses. But Moses talks the Almighty out of it and in fact brings God around to the realization that, oh, this is my circus—these are my monkeys. It won't do just to wipe these folks out and start all over again. Instead, the divine is called back to the much more challenging intricacies of actual relationship.

These are the folks, down there having a party for other gods almost immediately after they have been delivered from slavery and led on the difficult path to freedom. They are stiff-necked, recalcitrant, inconstant, frustrating, imperfect. And they are the people with whom God has chose to be in loving relationship. The easy path of cutting ties—or in this case, killing everyone—and starting over is not the best path. Relationship with us is never going to be perfect, because we are never going to be perfect. And so God faces up to the task of cultivating a proper relationship with this group of imperfect, inconstant people. There are no shortcuts to the promised land for God's people, and God chooses not to take the shortcut of starting over with better people every time we mess up.

By the time that we get to the gospel of Luke, it's a very different picture. God has put away the divine wrath option for good. Instead, when God's people go astray the divine response is gentle, persistent searching followed by uproarious joyfulness. When we read these parables in Luke, we tend to focus on the lostness. It resonates with us because no matter how hard we try to live well, the art of losing, and for that matter of being lost, isn't hard to master. Losing and being lost is a guaranteed aspect of mortality. But an exclusive focus on lostness distorts the focus of these parables. The narrative space isn't given to the experience of being lost, but to the reckless, undeviating search and to the party after the search. The motivating force for divine action is not anger at past betrayal, but anticipation of the joy that will come with reconciliation and redemption. This is the commitment God makes in Exodus, spelled out in a mature form in Luke: to respond to waywardness not with destruction but by doing the hard yards of reconciliation and then celebrating.

So, what does this have to do with us, today? We're calling today our kickoff Sunday, when many of our ministries start a new program year. It's kind of a weird day to celebrate, since we're essentially celebrating the end of summer vacations. But we do have a lot to celebrate, as many of us come back together after seeing less of each other over the last few months, we pick up the reins again of ministries that give us life, and we offer a number of new opportunities to grow together in discipleship. But what we don't really have is a clean slate. We aren't launching new ministries in a vacuum; we aren't "we" in a vacuum. Those things that have made us cautious or tentative about diving deeper into our relationship with God or into this community remain. This morning's story from Exodus invites us not to require perfection as a prerequisite for engagement. The path God chose in Exodus is a path of redeeming the imperfect present, rather than waiting for a future that has no need of redemption.

And we dive into these imperfect situations, groups, and relationships because we believe that the end of our hard work is an opportunity to join in the joy of God. I really think that it would change our lives together if we could truly believe that God takes joy in God's creation—that God, like the shepherd and the woman of the parables, throws parties and invites us to them. We serve and worship and learn together not because of obligation or guilt or fear of punishment, but because we are or hope to be infected by the contagious joy of God. Today, kickoff Sunday, isn't really about programs and teams and committees. Like every other Sunday here, like—we hope—our whole life as a church, it is about responding to a God who will never give up on us, and about the irresistible joy of redemption. Amen.