Gaines Congregational United Church of Christ

September 15, 2019

Old Testament Reading; Exodus 32: 7-14

Responsive Reading; Psalm 51:1-10

Epistle Reading; 1 Timothy 1: 12-17

Gospel Reading; Luke 15: 1-10

Sermon Title: CREATE AND RENEW

By Rev. Jim Gardner

Summary: Cheer up. God has got a thing for losers.

One time I was listening to the radio and a woman was recounting some of her experiences as a Christian councilor to women who had just recently been released from prison on parole. She took a half dozen or so parolees to a revival meeting.

The preacher was recounting how God used people who were flawed human beings to say the least. Noah was a drunk, Sampson was a drunk and a womanizer, Moses got to see the burning bush because he had fled Egypt because he was wanted for murder, Gideon was hiding from the authorities in a wine press, the disciple Matthew was a tax collector, Thomas was a doubter, Philip wanted more proof that Jesus was the Christ and the Apostle Paul hunted down followers of Jesus to hand them over to the Romans to be fed to the Lions.

One of the parolees leaned over and whispered to her counselor and said, “God sure has got a thing for losers, doesn’t he.”

Today’s scripture lessons could have been used by that revival preacher.

In our Exodus lesson the Hebrews got nervous when Moses took too long on the mountain, and molded a golden calf to worship, saying “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt.”

Ouch! Is that slapping God in the face or what?

According to this account God got really PO’d and told Moses that he was going to destroy them all and make Moses the new source of the line of God’s people. Moses declined the honor and begged God to spare his fickle people.

Our responsive reading from Psalm 51 is David acknowledging his terrible sins of adultery, murder and cover up in the Bathsheba incident. In the last verse of that reading David says, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” Hence my sermon title, “Create and Renew”.

In our Epistle lesson Paul confesses to having been a “blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man” but God had seen past it and made him a minister.

Finally, in the Gospel lesson Jesus shows why God would be so loving and forgiving of people that had failed him. With the sheep, “I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.” And with the coin, by the way the silver coin in a woman’s hat was a sign from her father of her worth as a wife and as a person, losing this would make her appear to be worthless. God does not want us to feel worthless and his angels celebrate our renewed worth to God.

OK that was a run down of our scriptures but what does that mean to us today?

Through out the Bible God is constantly telling us that we can never fall so far that we will fall out of his circle of love that He has for us.

First of all, when we confess our shortcomings to God, He will forgive us and then we must forgive ourselves.

Often when I come across as trying to tell you what to do, I am really telling myself to practice what I preach.

For the longest time I could not forgive myself for all the times I had failed God and hurt his people. My mentor when I was interning to be a minister told me that I had no right to not forgive myself. I knew it was true but was unable to do it. Then one day I was listening to an interview with Joyce Meyer and she said something that really got to Wanda and to me.

She said, “When you start putting yourself down you need to think about where that is coming from. God is not putting you down. He already forgave you and loves you so much that He gave His Son to die for you. It is not coming from Jesus. He already forgave you and He loves you so much that He died for you. So, who is trying to drive a wedge between you and God? The only answer to that is that it is the Devil. Only the Devil wants you to think God does not want you so he can get a shot at claiming your soul. Every time you put yourself down the Devil rejoices.”

OK, we know that we should forgive ourselves but that is easier said than done.

Guess what. It gets worse.

Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies and pray for those that persecute us. Return no man evil for evil. Jesus prayed for the people that murdered him as they were murdering him. “Forgive them Father for they know not what they do.” Jesus is the light and we are created in the image of God so that we can reflect the light of Jesus.

OK, that all sounds fine and dandy but how can we do it?

When someone hurts us again and again or does terrible things to innocent people or children, how can we do it? How can we forgive them or, how can we ask God to forgive them?

You know what, most of us can’t, but there are some who will step forward and show us how God wants us to do it.

A while back a mother in the Rochester area murdered her seven-year-old son by cutting his head off. The next day in Sunday school Danny in his opening prayer, prayed for the child’s family and for his mother who had chopped off his head.

Who does that? I know I did not. I was trying to figure out a suitable torture to make her pay for her vile act. I, the minister and teacher of the Sunday school, was reacting with cruel hatred while our friend Danny was giving us a lesson on what is expected of a follower of Christ.

In this age of biting rhetoric and terrible acts of terrorism how do we love and forgive? How can we change our whole human nature to be more like Jesus? How do we sit down with and eat with “tax collectors and sinners”? How can we, “hate the sin but love the sinner”?

Spoiler alert! We can’t. On our own we won’t make the grade but we can ask God to create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit. We will never make it completely but God will be thrilled with our attempt, if we mean it, and He will love us and be with us until the end of the age.

Hallelujah and Amen