

September 16, 2007
Rev. Mark Forrester
16th Sunday after Pentecost(c)

Love Creates Value

Luke 15:1-10

I've always been amazed and amused at how young first-born children encounter their newborn siblings. Parents often prepare and coach them so that they will share in the excitement of the moment, once it comes. And they do get excited as they hold their new brother or sister for the first time, as they then apprise visitors about every detail pertaining to their little brother or sister: its name, sex, weight, height, color of eyes, hair, etc. Their excitement seems real enough. And yet...there is always the flip side of this high moment that's anything but wonderful. Sooner or later unrestrained jealousy will rear its head, often when everyone least expects it.

About twenty years ago, when my nephew Pete was born, his (then) two year old sister, Annie, tried to go along with the happy little skit she'd been taught. At the end of the day, a weary group of extended family took her from the hospital back to the house for an evening meal and some needed rest. As the family offered thanks around the table, the prayer ended with, "and thank you God for little Pete." There was a short pause of silence soon broken by his sullen sister's protest, "NO PETE!" As far as she was concerned, the world had been a far more enjoyable place before her brother, this alien creature, had become the center of attention.

Sibling rivalry is, without a doubt, innate. We are told in the book of Genesis that, when Jacob and Esau were born to Rebecca and Isaac, Esau was delivered from the womb first, only to have his twin brother, Jacob, fast behind him, quite literally, grasping hold of his heel (25:24-25). Every pair of siblings before and since has had its own story of struggle, competition and conflict. The Cain and Abel story reminds us that sibling rivalry gave way to the first homicide--was also a fratricide. And it would seem that, since we all came from the same primal blood, all homicides, ancient and modern, are all fratricides as well.

Today's Gospel moves us in abrupt opposition to our inclinations. We have Jesus instructing his Disciples to be, of all things, Good Shepherds. As the word "Disciple" implies, Good Shepherding comes about through discipline: by listening, observing, acting and habituating ourselves to be

merciful seekers of the least, the last, the weak, the marginal, and utterly lost among us. Left to our own devices, we are more like our brother Cain who asked, without apology, "am I my brother's keeper?"

Contrary to much of today's self-help theology that portrays the Christian life to be as easy as pie, those who listened to Jesus' words knew that there was nothing easy or practical about being shepherds, let alone being the kind of "good" shepherd that Jesus described in detail. Who in their right mind would leave a herd of ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to search for the one that should have stayed within the fold? Losing one sheep in the total scheme of things isn't a disgrace. It's merely the cost of doing business. A few lost sheep in that world, and in our world, are expendable. We easily write them off. It's the ninety-nine at the bottom of the balance sheet that matters at the end of the day, right?

Mark Twain said that a "classic" is a "book that everybody praises and nobody reads." I have come to believe that there are certain parables, like that of the Good Shepherd and the Lost Coin, that are praised by the institutional church in much the same way. Our denominational hierarchies include these troublesome parables in the lectionary so that they will be read and proclaimed, but whenever a parish or campus ministry ignores the numbers game and focuses attention on the one instead of the ninety-nine, those who receive and evaluate our annual reports are still more concerned with the size of our herds than the quality of our shepherding. In fact, the quality of our shepherding is defined by the numbers of sheep we attract and keep in the fold.

Three years ago a United Methodist bishop approached me and wanted to know about our campus ministry at Vanderbilt. At that time our group was very solid and growing. In fact, I was pleased to tell him that our mid week Dinner & Devotion was running about fifty to sixty students. Instead of sharing my enthusiasm, this bishop, a man who actually carries a shepherd's staff to symbolize his office, looked at me with complete disbelief. He asked, "how many students are enrolled at Vanderbilt?" I knew where this line of questioning was going, but I had to tell the truth anyway. I said, "well, the numbers fluctuate a little, but the total enrollment of undergraduate and graduate students is somewhere around 10,000." There was an uncomfortable pause as the bishop did some algebra. Like a CPA who is about to tell you some bad news, he flat-out declared, "I'm amazed that you feel so good about your work when there such a disparity

of numbers! It seems to me that your ministry is reaching only a few and is pretty ineffective.”

I could have taken this personally, but I’ve been at this work for sixteen years and know that this line of questioning gets leveled against almost everyone in campus ministry. These ecclesial interrogations, however, shouldn’t discourage us from doing what we do. The twenty, thirty, forty or fifty students who are found in our fellowship every year sometimes come our way because they are on the margins of the wilderness, because they can’t or won’t fit within the campus mainstream, because they are following unconventional paths that lead them away from the larger crowd. Whether we “find” them or they “find” us is seldomly clear, but one thing is certain: we find each other whenever faith is lived as a journey rather than a destination; we “find” each other because we are seekers; and we are seekers, ultimately, because God is forever searching and seeking and patiently gathering, one-by-one, those who would otherwise remain invisible and unwanted.

If we read this morning’s lesson within the larger context of Luke’s gospel, it is clear that Jesus told these stories of a seeking and searching Good Shepherd kind of God because his critics, the clergy of his day, heaped contempt on him for eating with sinners and associating with outcasts. Certainly the God of the Hebrews had been feared and revered as a judging, jealous, partisan God who didn’t suffer outsiders gladly. Orthodoxy had established tight parameters that few dared to question, let alone violate.

So here we have Jesus telling them, and telling us, that the parameters of God’s kingdom are not so narrow, that in fact they are ever-widening to be inclusive of the least, the last, the lost and the forgotten. The Good News is that God’s nature is conditioned more by love and mercy than by instincts of jealousy, competition and retribution. In Christ, the Good Shepherd incarnated, God became like us so that we might become like God. In Christ, we learn, step by step, to act in ways that are still contrary to us. We learn that which does not come to us naturally, but by prayer, patience and kindness we move closer to what John Wesley said was the goal of this mortal life: perfection of heart.

We still have a long way to go. This past Tuesday, September 11, we gathered here in Benton Chapel to remember the six years that have passed since that tragic day. We gathered under the auspices of Project Dialogue to

ask the the question, “why do we hate?” Our speaker was none other than one of America’s literary and intellectual icons, Gore Vidal. He is, to put it nicely, an erasable old cuss who spoke with brutal candor. I really felt sorry for the moderator when he asked Mr. Vidal if he thought America could do better than this war of retribution we’re presently perusing in Iraq, if we could, in the moderator’s words, demonstrate our “innate goodness” as a people. Gore Vidal blithely rebutted the question by saying that he had never heard anyone use the phrase “innate goodness” seriously, and that the notion of humans being innately good was a preposterous joke. I didn’t appreciate the belittling way Vidal said what he said, but I found myself agreeing with the substance of his conclusion: that “innate goodness,” in human terms, is an oxymoron that only the naive and willfully blind perpetuate.

At best we are being sought and led by the shepherding Spirit of a loving God, a God whose innate goodness is real, a God whose infinite mercy is the basis of faith itself. And if we are not yet one in love at least we are one in sin, and if we are one in the bond of sin this is also a gift because it precludes the possibility of separation through judgment, doesn’t it?

Today’s Gospel tells us two things: God’s love is poured out universally for everyone from bishops to the loneliest people on the planet; and secondly, God’s shepherding love doesn’t seek value, it creates value. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value. Our value is a gift, not an achievement. And because our value is a gift, we don’t have to prove ourselves. In spite of what corporate and ecclesial powers try to tell us, we don’t have to be successful, only valuable. We don’t have to make billions or convert millions. We have only to seek to make a difference, and particularly in the lives society counts least and last. God’s ultimate love is our final value. Amen.