

Too Precious to Lose

Exodus 32: 7-14 Luke 15: 1-10

As our house continues to undergo its extensive renovations, we're unsurprisingly being confronted with the accumulations of stuff for nearly 15 years of residing at the same place. Some of it was lying around in drawers. Some of it was tucked deep into bookshelves.

Occasionally we would stumble upon a treasure. I discovered a small photo album with pictures of Ray and Rachel from when we were living in Fairfax, Virginia. Ray was 8-9 years old and Rachel was 3-4 years old. A friend had compiled the pictures of our kids playing together in different settings – they had two sons, one Ray's age and one Rachel's age. They played together a lot. She had given it to Ray as a farewell remembrance when we left Fairfax to come to Florida.

Ray and his friend Phillip are now handsome, mature young professionals. Phillip works for New York agency McCann, a leading international marketing group. Of course, Ray remains Online Director for Progress Florida, a communications hub for progressive causes throughout Florida. Back then, they were goofy kids. They made "forts" from sheets draped over tables. Today, they bear little resemblance to who they were 25 years ago. It was fun to remember and a delight to recover.

We knew they all had lots of promise. They had supportive, caring parents who had the financial means to provide for their kids in most ways. They had good educations and had the right attitude toward personal growth and capability. They had everything going for them. One might think that nothing could go wrong. However, other kids in similar situations have not had such outcomes in their adult lives. We don't take their relative success for granted.

Looking at all the books and papers left behind by Ray and Rachel is a remembrance of all that was invested by them and by us in their successful paths. It was too hard to part with much of it, but you need to let it go, and then try to keep up with wherever they're headed next. At least now, they can accumulate their own stuff in their own places.

Our scriptures give us lessons in the way God values those whom God has cared for. It isn't always pretty as we see in the first reading from Exodus 32. God has taken notice of the wild party taking place at the bottom of the mountain where God was meeting with Moses and providing the Ten Commandments. It seems that Moses' brother Aaron and the rest of the leadership became disillusioned by Moses' long delay atop the mountain. They decided that another god should be fashioned who could lead them forward. For God, this is the final straw.

God has hit that magical threshold with his Hebrew people whom God led out of Egypt, across the parted sea, guided through the wilderness, providing for their various needs as they arose, often as a result of annoying whining and belligerent complaining.

God yells at Moses about this turn of events. God has a full head of steam up. He tells Moses, *Go down [to] your people*. Now they're *your people*, Moses, because God really means they are not **my people**. Although God has ordered Moses to go down the mountain and do something with his people, in the next breath, it seems like God isn't waiting – God is **that** angry.

*I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may destroy them. Then I will make **you** a great nation.*

God is at that point where God is completely ready to toss out the flawed and failed, and start all over again, virtually from scratch. God is ready to wipe out this covenant people. And God is ready to take the promise of Abraham and start over with Moses. God says: *Then I will make **you** a great nation, [Moses].*

Reminiscent of Abraham dickering with God over Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses quickly goes into negotiation mode with God. Moses tries to convince God, but **not** that these are really good people, flawed and failed, who can do better. No, Moses tells God that it will look bad for God to appear to have saved and liberated a people only to bring them out in the desert and destroy them in a fit of anger. That really makes God look bad, and God doesn't want to look bad like that, right?

Moses also invokes the covenant made with Abraham, which Moses implicitly reminds God, was not conditioned on the excellent behavior of the descendants, but on the faithfulness and devotion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Y'know, God, those guys weren't totally perfect either. Right?

Moses has appealed to God's highest ethics in order to repress an ugly outburst of divine wrath. Can Moses change God's mind? Yes, he can because God relents.

Moses, on the hand, decides that this sinful people won't be getting off scot-free. Heads would roll, and I do mean heads rolled. But God stuck with the flawed and failed, a complete act of grace, undeserved by God's people.

A good next question would ask whether you need to make an appeal like Moses, presenting an argument that persuades God to act differently from the way that God may have intended only a moment before. Knowing that we have no ground for argument, no righteousness of our own to pledge, claim, or exchange, we ought to think about how this works. Because we know how we fit the mold of flawed and failed, we have to hope that there is something better than trying to persuade God with our wit and wisdom.

For some insight, we can turn to the two parables that Jesus tells in our passage at the start of Luke 15.

It seems that Jesus was hanging out with the usual rabble, tax collectors and other sinners, the flawed and failed as far as the social standards were concerned. He was teaching them about the Kingdom of God and the promise of new life.

Some Pharisees and scribes are appalled. *This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.* Jesus is making himself unclean by keeping company with such people. It's sinful arrogance to set oneself among such people as if there were no consequences.

Jesus hears the muttering and grumbling from the scribes and Pharisees. He tells them these parables to help them understand the focus of his ministry. Who knows; maybe they'll get it.

He talks of the shepherd who loses one of his hundred sheep. Rather recklessly, he leaves the other 99 sheep in the open country and goes searching for the one lost sheep. In other words, the shepherd is willing to risk his entire flock, possibly all his wealth, all of his promise, in order to seek out and save the one lost sheep. The one thing Jesus' audience should realize is that this sheep is precious to the shepherd. It isn't precious because it is such a well-behaved sheep. Instead, it's a real bonehead sheep. This moron sheep is probably screwing up all the time, getting itself into all kinds of trouble, causing the shepherd fits on a regular basis. Still the shepherd leaves his flock and goes off searching for this flawed and failed sheep.

The answer to the question we asked before, about how we would fare if we could not appeal, like Moses, with wit and wisdom to prevail on God's good graces to get a change of God's attitude, finds its answer here in Jesus' parable. The lost ones, the flawed and failed, are precisely the ones who need God and God's blessing the most. As Jesus, the good shepherd, pursues the flawed and failed, Jesus acts in a reflection of how God has decided to act, and from the same spirit. God and Jesus regard the flawed and failed as precious, worthy of seeking out and bringing back to the fold. These flawed and failed are too precious to lose.

Let's go further with the next parable of the lost coin. The circumstances are similar. A woman loses one of her ten silver coins. She is far from destitute since she has nine silver coins. It isn't her last coin. Yet she acts as if those other nine coins don't matter. Suddenly this lost coin has become precious, valued enough to drop everything and exhaustively search to find the lost one.

Let's also note how both woman and the shepherd rejoice when the lost one is found. They celebrate the recovery of the one that was lost, calling friends and neighbors to share in the delight of recovering the flawed and the failed, the precious one lost and recovered. *Rejoice with me* each of them says to their friends and neighbors, for the precious one has been gained anew.

We should see in the image of the flawed and failed a reflection of ourselves before God. We know what Jesus teaches, and we know that the expectations remain very high. Like a stupid sheep, we're prone to finding ourselves in a real mess, having done something really stupid ... again. We can take heart in knowing that God has a lot

of experience with people like us. All that experience has yielded an awareness for God that, when you have invested so much in those who remain flawed and failed, nonetheless you realize how precious they are.

That first reaction to walk away from them and to dismiss them, to punish them until they behave properly, to withhold your love until they've earned it, all those kinds of strategies to force compliance and demand obedience have all been tried before, and none of them has resolved the problem. God has likely figured out that ending this experiment with total erasure and starting over simply means going through the same process of investing love and promise, then working through painful flaws and sad failures all over again. There has to be a better way, and that is grace and love, despite knowing that the one who you love is flawed and is going to fail more than you would prefer. That is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus and the Kingdom which he advances.

The other piece is for us to be aware of the flawed and failed around us, the ones who have become lost, neglected, discarded. They figured in the sermons of the last two weeks, too. They're flawed and failed only in the sense of how our society regards these folks. Our society is not the Kingdom of God where the lost are pursued extravagantly and relentlessly and even recklessly. We're cautious, not wanting to give up too much to save the jerks from the fate that they must have created for themselves. We're fine with letting flawed people fail and condemning them for it. Fortunately, God does not treat us in the same way that we treat the flawed and failed around us. Indeed, these particularly flawed and failed folks are the primary focus of the Kingdom.

Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom once again points us toward the strange, unique, and blessed priorities of our gracious and loving God. The flawed and failed; just like us, we're all precious in God's sight. Let's not forget that for ourselves. And let's be sure to remember that the same applies to those who may be different from us, but are simply flawed and failed in a different way. For God, they're too precious to lose, just as we are. If only our society would wake up to that sacred truth: they're too precious to lose. They deserve the love that we desire for ourselves, because they have that value and promise in the eyes of God.