

Lectionary readings

Psalm 112

¹Praise the Lord!

Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who greatly delight in his commandments.

²Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.

³Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures for ever.

⁴They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.

⁵It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
who conduct their affairs with justice.

⁶For the righteous will never be moved;
they will be remembered for ever.

⁷They are not afraid of evil tidings;
their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.

⁸Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.

⁹They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
their righteousness endures for ever;
their horn is exalted in honour.

¹⁰The wicked see it and are angry;
they gnash their teeth and melt away;
the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

Luke 15: 1-7

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' ³So he told them this parable: ⁴'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? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

Sermon

In all the messages in our culture these days that tells us how we can be happy and powerful, there aren't very many urging us to be sheep. In fact, the image of a wolf might be closer.

how much we care for one another. Let me say that again: *our well-being is directly proportional to how much we care for one another*. And here is a corollary: our ability to care for each other depends on recognizing each other as being the same.

It is no coincidence that our current crisis is deeper than ever during the same period that we are more fragmented than ever. Reds vs. Blues, Jews vs. Arabs, liberal Christians vs. conservative Christians. And on and on.

The media barrages us constantly with such stories of either/or. Issues are black or white. People are friends or enemies. Our leaders are winners or losers.

It's easy to understand why the media does this. Conflict *sells*. The problem is, it's all too easy to absorb it as a valid outlook on life. If we're not careful, we see people everywhere who we think are different from us. People we can't trust. People we should avoid.

It's no wonder in that climate that we tend to turn inward. It feels like there's danger out there. It's time to circle the wagons. Defend ourselves.

At the risk of stating the obvious, these are not ideal conditions for problem solving. As long as we keep avoiding those with whom we disagree, our problems can only get worse.

And so, more than ever, we need to come here and learn from our stories. Jesus teaches us to *look* at each other, to *recognize him* in each other. If we do that, we can seek the *truth* together and, inevitably, *grow together*.

We *really are* all the same. At our core, we are all made in our creator's image. When you feel sad, your sadness feels the same as when I feel sad. When you feel joy, your heart beats just like my joyful heart. All of us the same. We need food and shelter and clothing and love.

And what's more, we all face the same challenges. We're all scared of not having enough, and so we're tempted to take more than our share, or get to our share before anyone else.

And just as our challenges are the same, so is our salvation just the same: it is to remember our common humanity, to work to meet our common needs. And we are given the opportunity to do this all the time.

Isn't this what our tradition is all about? Just think how far we have come. Congregationalism itself was originally a movement for

salvation), a minister in the Church of Spiritual Inner Awareness (a non-denominational Christian church), a "wondering" Christian who attends a Unitarian church, and two self-described "pagans."

During one of our lunches, we asked the conservative Christian to explain her community's fierce opposition to gay marriage. We spent quite a while working through the sectarian language and catch phrases of her explanation, and in the end we pared it down to something we could all understand clearly. Here is the first part: *The family as an institution is the basic unit of society. A threat to the institution of the family is a threat to the survival of humanity, and therefore it is also an affront to God.*

Not one of us had a problem with this statement. Everyone at the table felt passionate about the sanctity of family. To all of us, family is an essential part of being human. We all shared the same devotion to it. We all understood our need for it. We all felt we would protect it at any cost.

What was different amongst us was not the basics... we all agreed with each other about the "what" in "what's important." What we disagreed about was the "how" to protect it. The conservative Christian thought this was by outlawing gay marriage. For others, a better way to protect "the family" would be to support a more equitable economy so that two parents would not always both have to work. Others thought it was to allow *family* to be defined more broadly.

We didn't *solve* anything that day, but we made a start. We came out of that conversation recognizing each other a little better. We shared a common goal *that precedes the disagreement*. Had we kept going, I have no doubt we could have made even more progress.

We had come a big step closer to remembering we are in the same human flock.

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And here we have to leave our sheep analogy again. Because just as it is true that we cannot survive if we do not stay together and follow the shepherd, it is also true that we have to be shepherds ourselves.

It is not enough to follow anymore. We also have to *lead*. We who have been given the blessings of truth and light as experienced in our tradition – we owe it to God and to ourselves to *live* these truths in our lives.

We *must assert* that Humanity is one body and one spirit. All people are children of the same God, no matter whom we worship.