

Homily Proper 19, 2025

Year C

Exodus 32:1,7-14

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1st Timothy 1:12-17

St. Luke 15:1-10

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus who lived from 329-389 AD was one of three Early Church theologians called the Cappadocian Fathers. The other two were Basil of Caesaria and Gregory of Nyssa. These three made significant, indeed essential contributions to the development and deepening of Christian self-understanding, particularly about the Trinity and how to practice the Christian life.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus was Patriarch of Constantinople. I have a small Moleskine notebook. It is pocket sized and over the years I've pasted in quotations from things I've read from the Christian Tradition. One of these quotations is from St. Gregory of Nazianzus that reflects what we heard in today's Gospel. Where in the Gospel Jesus says, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who need no repentance," St. Gregory says, "Nothing gives such pleasure to God as the conversion and salvation of human beings for whom God's every word and revelation exist." Combining these two together, one sinner who repents and salvation of human beings for whom God's every word and revelation exists, we could say, nothing gives God such pleasure as making us into a good cause.

Making us into a good cause. Aren't we already? Well, let's see. Today's Gospel is so familiar that it can easily lose its punch. The Pharisees grumble, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." It specifically mentions tax collectors. Toward the end of the movie, *The Good, the Bad, and The Ugly*, the nameless Clint Eastwood says to the bandit Tuco, "There are two kinds of people in this world: those with loaded guns and those that dig. You dig." There is a similar binary across our own culture. There are two kinds of people, the oppressor and the oppressed. There are the rich and powerful, those who dominate, and the poor, the marginalized, the exploited. And belonging to the oppressed confers a moral superiority that the dominant does not possess. The Pharisees, the righteous are exploiters and hypocrites. People like tax collectors are not really bad, but are made so by the system itself.

So, for example, Luigi Mangone who shot and killed Brian Thompson, the CEO of United Health is not the bad guy. The CEO is because his company denies insurance claims. Lyle and Eric Menendez are not the bad guys, but victims of abuse from their father. So, in the Gospel, it's hard for us to see the tax collectors as the villain. Instead, they are disreputable like dog catchers. Jesus doesn't hang out with people who are bad in their own right, but made to be bad and seen to be bad by an unjust system.

Can today's Gospel be rewritten in some way so we can really experience its full impact? That is Jesus eating not just with those who were merely unacceptable to polite society, that whatever bad things they did are no fault of their own, but were made to be by others, but with those who are of themselves and by their own choices objectively evil? Try this on for size: Jesus was a guest at Jeffrey Epstein's 50th birthday party. In other words, Jesus receives sinners and eats with them, does not mean those who are not really that bad, but those who really are that bad.

Hanging out not with those who are not that bad but those who really are that bad, is there reason to be concerned about who you spend time with? Again, can we find a contemporary example to help us experience the punch that today's Gospel packs? Instead of going to lunch with others, how about spending time on the internet? You've probably read articles about "pig butchering." Older men mostly, older men who are alone find a friend on the internet, a younger woman who works to build a relationship with them, forming an attachment, telling them what they want to hear, making declarations of love, promising companionship while gradually inducing them to give up financial information, until finally extracting all their assets and disappearing. Think of the so-called manosphere, the Tate brothers preaching misogyny and conspiracy theories. Finally, there is the teenager who, following the prompts of Chat GPT, committed suicide.

The point of everything said so far is, in the Gospel, the Pharisees have a legitimate point. They are not wrong. Hard as it is for us to accept it, the Pharisees are saying no it's not that bad, but yes, it is that bad. It is that bad, all of it. And you, Jesus, are associating with it is that bad. And what does Jesus say about it? Jesus gives the parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. Again, it tugs at the heartstrings, but what does it mean?

I live in Sierra Madre and my house is quite a way up the hill, four blocks below where the mountains start to shoot up. So, we have wildlife. Not "lions and tigers and bears oh my!" But, well, bears and coyotes. I go to the gym at 5:00 a.m. leaving the house before my wife Tracy wakes up. Last week on coming home, I found her wide awake and fully dressed and she said was awakened by the sound of dog yelping while being attacked by a coyote. It went on for a long time before it stopped. It was awful.

Jesus says, "who among you, having lost one sheep, would not leave the 99, not in an enclosed corral with a high fence, but out in the wilderness, and go in search of the one that is lost and not come back until he found it?" That is to risk the possibility that what my wife heard as one instance be multiplied by 99. The answer? No one. No one would do that. The shepherd returns with the one sheep to find that instead that of the 99 he left behind, only 50 are still alive. It's like *Jack and the Beanstalk*. "Hi Mom, I traded the cow for three magic beans." Who among you would not? No one. And the Lost Coin? We're not talking about the Pearl of Great Price. It's just a quarter that fell out of pocket while sitting on a couch that will turn up sometime. Who among you would not? Not one of us. That is the point. Not one of us, but God. With more joy in heaven over one who repents than 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. As the hymn says, "There's a wideness in God's mercy not like but infinitely more than the wideness of the sea."

Why is that? In the Old Testament, the people of Israel are at the base of Mt. Sinai waiting for Moses to come back down. The Scripture says that Moses was delayed. How long was he delayed? We are not told. By the time they had left Egypt, they had been there 430 years having heard nothing from the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all that time until Moses arrived on the scene. They had spent all that time building monuments of stone representing the gods of the Egyptians who just sat there neither moving nor speaking; with everything like the rise and fall of the Nile as regular and predictable as clockwork. In other words, everything stayed the same and didn't move. In contrast, Exodus was nothing but movement and novelty. Things happened that never happened before and have never happened since all in a very short span of time. So, what was the delay of Moses coming down

from the mountain compared to 430 years of slavery? But in such a short time they regressed away from movement and novelty and a future different from the past to things that don't move and don't change.

Like the Pharisees in today's Gospel, God says to Moses, "Yes, they are that bad and the only thing to do is get rid of them and start over. I'll take the promise for them and give it to you. Moses intercedes for them and what does he say? To keep your promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has nothing to do with them and who they are and everything to do with you and who you are. Your servants to whom you did swear by your own self. The promise that you swore by your own self was not because either they or we were a good cause. Neither they nor we are a good cause. The only good cause is your own self. So, replacing them with me will change nothing. The Egyptians will say, "with evil intent did you bring them forth to slay them in the mountains and consume them from the face of the earth." Or, you are no better than they are. You are not a good cause yourself. The only way forward is to make them into a good cause.

The only way forward is not to find a good cause but to make a good cause. This is what St. Paul speaks of today in his letter to Timothy. You probably remember the phrase, "thorn in the flesh." St. Paul speaks of this in his letter to the Corinthians. He is afflicted with something, but he doesn't say what it is. Through the ages there has been a lot of speculation about it. St. Paul made a comment about how, if possible, they would have given him their eyes. We simply don't know what it was, only that it harassed him and though he prayed to God to rid him of it, God said "no." "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Today, St. Paul says, "Formerly I blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him. I acted in ignorance and unbelief." He could have added that he was an accessory to the murder of St. Stephen, the very first Christian martyr. St. Paul didn't throw the stones. He did hold the coats of those who did and approved of what was done. My own speculation is that from time to time this memory would grab hold of him and torment him as his thorn in the flesh. It wasn't just the memory itself, but that despite this, he was given the gift of being the very last one to behold the Risen Christ, while everyone else, us included, have to be content with Word and Sacrament as the 99 left in the wilderness, the 99 reasonably righteous who need not that much repentance, and there being more joy before the angels of God with this one sinner who repents.

We could ask, if this is the case, what do today's Scriptures have to do with us? If we are the 99 left in the wilderness, and the 99 reasonably righteous who need some but not too much repentance; if we are not part of a mob that killed someone, if we weren't there at Jeffery Epstein's 50th birthday party, and if we stay off the dark web; if we're not that bad, then what?

Well, why are we not that bad? There is a concept in ethics called Moral Luck. By the luck of the draw the conditions of our lives, conditions of which we had no choice, no part in creating, like the time and place of our birth, or our part and place in society, conditions favorable to a life well lived. In other words, we're not in the anarchy that is say, Haiti. A word a Christian would use for Moral Luck is grace. This doesn't do away with responsibility of making choices for good or ill. It's like standing on a headland looking at the ocean and at people trying to surf. They have to wait for the wave and paddle hard to catch and ride it. But if the wave doesn't come, no amount of paddling will help. All of which is

to say is that if we're not that bad, there is the potential that we could be and so that the wideness of God's mercy is as necessary to us as it is for the tax collectors and sinners in the Gospel story.

If we are good cause, it because God has made us so. It's not because of what we ourselves did, but were given to grab hold of, cooperate with, contribute to the help given to become a good cause. If we're not that bad it's because we had help. If someone is that bad, they need extra help which can lead to more joy in heaven, because "nothing gives such pleasure to God as the conversion and salvation of human being for whom his every word and every revelation exist."