

## **It's All About the Relationship**

**Sermon preached on March 21, 2021, Fifth Sunday in Lent**

**The Rev. Mary Keenan, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Austin, TX**

This week, I've had a guest at my house. She's a sweet blonde dog called Aspen who has stayed with me before when her person is out of town. Aspen is a bit skittish and shy, she follows me around the house all day long. Whenever I leave the house she waits by the window for my return. So imagine my surprise when, after I let her out in my backyard, she found an opening in my fence and escaped.

It took me a while to notice, but once I did I grabbed her leash and ran out the door to find her. Half a block away, a neighbor said he'd seen her around the corner - and there she was, trotting down the street. When I called to her she paused, looked at me, then turned and ran farther away.

Off I went, down one street, around another corner. Another neighbor had seen her and pointed me in the right direction. Around another block there she was! She looked so happy, smelling the smells of other people's grass and the tracks of the neighborhood deer. I called her name she stopped and looked at me. She almost bolted away.

But I held up her leash and she got so excited. Even though she'd been galavanting freely around the neighborhood on her own, she knew that leash meant WALK! So she very happily let me put the leash on her collar and walk her home.

Now, what Aspen interrupted when she made her dash was me reading the scripture for today and wondering how to preach these texts. First we have Jeremiah talking to people in exile because of their broken relationship with God. Then we have a psalmist who is delighting in the study of God's law. And last we have Jesus who, in answer to some inquiring Greeks, tells a cryptic tale about seeds dying.

As I considered these stories and songs from our faith, it occurred to me that Aspen had just acted out the themes pretty neatly for me. After all, like the exiles, she had kind of broken our relationship for a bit by breaking out of the zone of safety I had established for her. And like the psalmist, she was actually delighted to be reminded of how those boundaries had worked out for her in terms of her safety and wellbeing. And as her caregiver, I did all I could to protect her while still letting her be her best, sweet self.

I don't want to go too far with this analogy, because I am certainly not God and God doesn't have us on a leash. But what God has us IN is a relationship. When we run away from that relationship, God chases us. And when we are reminded of that relationship - the kind of love that follows us no matter how far we stray, we are often relieved to be in its embrace again.

That's what Jeremiah is talking about when he says that the Lord will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah.

"I will be their God and they shall be my people."

This is not covenant as a set of rules written in stone, it is a relationship that is intimate enough to be written on our hearts - so close that it is part of us, it is who we are.

That's what the psalmist is celebrating.

With my whole heart I seek you;  
Let me not stray from your commandments.  
I treasure your promise in my heart,  
that I may not sin against you.

And...

I have taken greater delight in the way of your decrees  
than in all manner of riches.

The Hebrew that is translated as "law" in this psalm is better understood as torah or instruction. And it includes not just the "rules" but the story of how God created the world, loved us into existence, and pursued us into relationship

With that understanding, that our greatest joy can be found in relationship with the God who created and loved us into existence,  
With the understanding that even when we break that relationship God will seek us, what are we to make of the gospel reading today.

Some Greeks have heard about Jesus healing the sick and raising Lazarus from the dead. They saw him being treated like a hero when he entered Jerusalem. So they want to meet this Jesus! They make a respectful approach to one of the disciples and say, "Sir, we'd like to see Jesus."

What they get in reply is a confusing parable about seeds dying, along with something mysterious about the hour coming and losing one's life. John's gospel is like that, full of cryptic mysterious messages that only make sense when you read them backwards from the crucifixion and resurrection. We can see in the description of a seed dying to bear much fruit a likeness to Christ's death and resurrection. We know how the story ends and that helps us understand the analogy.

But even reading this passage forward, from the point of view of the Greeks and disciples who heard them first, even reading these words without knowing how the story ends we find something in common with the whole theme of scripture - relationship with God is not just central, it is the whole point.

Jesus says, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."

Jesus also says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself."

As all relationships, our relationship with God and God's relationship with us has times of joy and times of trouble. The psalmist describes the joy of being completely enrapt in knowing God. Jeremiah tells the exiles that after they broke away from God there will be a joyful time of reunion.

And Jesus is telling his followers - including all of us - that being in relationship with him will lead to life - it won't be easy - but even in the hard times Jesus will not abandon us, God will not leave us.

The writer and theologian Frederick Buechner described this dynamic by saying that "salvation is an experience first and a doctrine second." I would add that the relationship is salvation.

Here's how he expresses it:

When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. It is the one you love who is. You forget yourself. You deny yourself. You give of yourself, so that by all the rules of arithmetical logic there should be less of yourself than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox there is more. You feel that at last you really are yourself.

You do not love God so that, tit for tat, he will then save you. To love God is to be saved. To love anybody is a significant step along the way.

This is the paradox of our salvific relationship with Jesus, that we find life when we lose it. That we die with Christ so that we rise with him.

And so, like runaway Aspen, like the lonely exiles in Babylon, like the psalmist, and the Greeks and the disciples, we are invited into this life-giving relationship with God. It costs us everything and yet brings us be more fully ourselves. It is written on our hearts and also treasured in our hearts.

As Buechner's reflection summarizes:

Whichever side of the grave you happen to be talking about, to love God and live for him is Heaven.

It is a gift, not an achievement.

AMEN