

Proper 19, Year C: 12 September 2010

As we get closer to election time,
it is more and more common to hear someone suggesting
that because Candidate X once thought this, and now says that,
he or she isn't being honest!
Changing one's mind is generally thought to be a sign of insincerity or weakness.

Imagine God changing God's mind!
The thought is enough to bring on an attack of insecurity.
Wouldn't God be insincere or weak if God changes the Divine mind?
"Extra. Extra! God flip-flops!"

Yet Scripture shows that God is more than willing
to take another look at a situation or a person.
Take the story of Moses.
He comes down from Mt. Sinai to find that the people have gone back to their idols.
But instead of asking God to strike out, Moses implores God to show mercy.
He reminds God that these are the people God brought out of Egypt;
these people are the chosen-ones, the heirs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And as the writer of Exodus tells the story:
And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to bring upon his people.
Wow! Talk about changing your mind: God *repents*?!

Actually, it seems to happen more often than we think:
there are instances recorded in 2 Samuel, in 1 Chronicles,
in the Psalms, in several of the prophets
The essence of God is not punishment, even when we faulty humans deserve it.
The essence of God is always compassion.

Paul knows this well.
In today's second lesson, he reminds young Bishop Timothy
that God changed the Divine mind about Paul himself.
Paul's fault was that he had been a self-righteous zealot
ready to persecute and strike down anyone thought to be doctrinally unsound or impure.
Remember he held the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death.

Yet he can write to Timothy:
*But God had compassion on me because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,
and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me
with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

*This sermon was delivered by The Rev. Theo Park,
Interim Rector of Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing, MN.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has used
and apologizes to those whom he has overlooked.*

So wrote the forgiven Paul, whose own words overflow with thanksgiving because God had changed the Divine mind and delivered Paul from being a stiff, unforgiving religious bigot.

Perhaps you may think that Paul didn't change much, but that's to judge him on part of his record and to ignore the breadth and depth of Paul's deep love for God.

In the Gospel today, we see the religious leaders condemning Jesus because he ate meals with religious and social outcasts, those who had offended in thought, word, and deed. Let's not trivialize the faults of many of these outcasts. Like the Israelites in the time of Moses, like Paul, some of these people are living self-destructive lives, hurting themselves as they hurt others. It's not that the Pharisees are wrong about them. They are wrong about God.

The evangelist has Jesus tell two simple stories to illustrate this, one about a shepherd who has lost a sheep, and the other about a woman who has lost the equivalent of a day's wages. Both expend great energy and exhibit risky behavior to recover what could have been considered expendable.

Jesus says that the point is that the person you despise most, perhaps with great cause, is nevertheless prized by God, who is ever ready to change the Divine mind and in the process change self-destruction into integrated holiness.

Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Who is it that is rejoicing in the presence of the angels?
God, the Divine self.

We live in troubled times in both church and state. Our religious, political, and social divisions make it easy for us to take sides and to condemn those who don't believe as we do. There's plenty of evidence in the media that even notable people live self-destructive lives. We read, too, of religious leaders who easily shun those they believe to be in error and who would readily drive the "other" out of one fellowship or another, or break communion with either "conservatives" or "liberals," depending on which side they have taken, or wage war against those of other faiths, because "their God is not our God."

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This kind of positioning may feel good, even righteous, but it is not what God wants. God wants to change the Divine mind about people. That's what love means. Judging comes easily to us. Changing our minds about people is far harder. Yet this is what we are called to do as people created in the image and likeness of God. God has changed the Divine mind about each one of us. God is in the process of turning our lives upside down. This morning God will change the Divine mind about each one of us yet again, with enormous patience and love. And so we ask that the changed-mind love of God will fill us and redeem us as we pray:

O God, because without you we are not able to please you in your compassion grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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