

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C  
Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14  
Ps 51 *passim*  
1 Tim 1:12-17  
Lk 15:1-32

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September 11, 2016

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This Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time in this year of Our Lord 2016 is also the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the terrorist attacks we identify as just plain “9/11.” Fifteen years ago the Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time fell on September 16, and we had the same readings as we’ve just heard today. I was a newly ordained deacon and that day, five days after 9/11, was the first time I got to preach the homily. The message that day, in essence, was that God gets the last word, God has the final say.

As I hear these readings again today, it’s the idea of justice that strikes me. Our society’s idea of justice is about something called distributive justice, which basically means “To each his (or her) own,” and we measure justice with standards of fairness. Think of how quickly little children learn, in the face of injustice, to howl, “That’s not fair!” And as we grow up, it’s drummed into us that a deal’s a deal, and deals are to be honored.

We find this principle of distributive justice reflected in each of the three readings we’ve just heard proclaimed. First, in Exodus chapter 32, Moses is up on Mount Sinai, talking with God. The people have grown tired of waiting for God and Moses to finish up. In their impatience, they melt down their gold jewelry and fashion a golden calf, an idol they start to worship. God gets irritated; he gets angry. He tells Moses that he’s fed up, he’s ready to throw in the towel on this people and start over again. He tells Moses, “I’ll make a new people out of *your* descendants.” God and the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had a deal, and they didn’t live up to their part of the bargain.

St. Paul tells Timothy that he, Paul, didn’t deserve to be a minister of the Gospel because he used to hunt down and persecute the followers of Jesus.

And then we have the penitent son, and, man, does he have a deal to offer his father! He’s starving, and he’s got nowhere to go but home. He knows, he says, that he’s squandered his status as son but figures he can live in the bunkhouse, work as a hired hand, and get room and board in return. A pretty good deal. No doubt the older brother would have been perfectly happy with that arrangement.

But God doesn’t care about deals. God cares about relationships. God cares about love. God says, “You will be my people and I will be your God.” He doesn’t say, “I will be your God, and take care of you, **IF** . . . *provided that* you be my faithful people.” No, God

knows that time and time again we will be unfaithful, we will NOT honor the deal, but God will not stop being our God. He will not stop loving us. We just need to turn to him with, as today's Psalm put it, with a pure heart, with a contrite and humble heart.

In Exodus Moses reminds God, the angry God, of the promises God had made to Abraham, Abraham's son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob. And that reminder was all it took for God to relent.

In the letter to Timothy, St. Paul responds with gratitude and joy to think that, undeserving though he was, God in his mercy appointed him to be an apostle.

In the Gospel Luke gives us three images of how ridiculously extravagant is the mercy of God. After all, isn't it kind of nutty to leave 99 sheep to fend for themselves while the shepherd goes after the one who has strayed from the flock? And how extravagant is it to turn the house upside down to find one lost coin? And what can we say about the father in the story of the two sons? The younger son says, "Dad. I can't wait for you to die. I've got places to go, people to see, things to do." And the father doesn't stand in his way. He cashes out his son's inheritance and sends him on his way. And he waits. Each day he scans the horizon, until one day he sees his son trudging home. He disregards all the usual dignities, gathers up the skirts of his robe, and *runs* to meet the boy. And does he stop to listen to the pretty speech his son has so carefully rehearsed? Does he stop to listen to his son's deal? No! Forget about living in the bunkhouse. Forget about being just one of the farmhands. "No," the father says, "this is my son and I love him!"

That's not to say that the son's bad choices have no consequences. The father understands and respects the principles of distributive justice. When the older son squawks, the father assures him that the younger one doesn't get a second crack at the estate. "Everything I have belongs to you," he says. "*Every single thing*. But that's just stuff. What's important is that I am his father and he is my son, and I love him."

Jesus told this story as a wakeup call to the scribes and Pharisees. There is more joy in heaven over prostitutes and tax collectors who turn away from sin and embrace the good news, than over all the "good" people who forget that the number one commandment is to be loving.

Jesus tells us that his Father has graced us with wonderful gifts – intelligence and free will and imagination and creativity. He tells us that the Father knows that at times we will misuse and abuse those precious gifts. BUT he assures us that all we have to do is come to our senses, dust ourselves off, turn to the Father and let his welcoming arms enfold us.