

“Burn or Turn”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 11, 2022 – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 32:7-14; Luke 15:1-10

Burnin’ and turnin’: These are the subjects of both of today’s scripture lessons that I will focus on during this morning’s sermon.

In our first lesson from Exodus, we read of God burning hot because of the disobedient and unfaithful actions of the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. God burned because, though God had saved the people, safely bringing them out of Egypt, where they toiled as slaves, the people of God failed to respond to God’s amazing grace by giving thanks and praise to God. Rather, they chose to worship a lifeless and malleable and controllable god of their own making in the golden calf. In so doing, the Israelites offered the living God who saved them a ginormous slap in the face.

But Moses, who led God’s people away from suffering by the oppressive hand of Pharaoh, once again led them away from suffering from the burning wrath of God as Moses pleaded with God to turn from burning and to turn from the plan to burn the Israelites with some kind of calamity. Moses reminded God that these children of Abraham, wandering and wayward as they were, were God’s children, who had received God promise that they and the generations who would follow them would be blessed by God. Responding to the pleading of Moses, God turned from burning.

In our gospel lesson from Luke, we read about more turning from burning. Burning hot were the Pharisees and scribes, who were often good guys and were considered in their day to be holy ones who were close to God. These holy insiders were hot because Jesus welcomed and ate with “tax collectors and sinners,” who were considered by the Pharisees and scribes to be bad guys, distant from God and God’s grace, and wholly unholy. Perhaps what made the Pharisees and scribes burn even hotter than Jesus welcoming the riff-raff was that those unholy outsiders were *coming near to God* as they listened and responded to Jesus’ message. Rather than rejoicing because fellow children of Abraham were receiving God’s mercy and grace, the scribes and Pharisees grumbled and burned.

And so Jesus offered three parables to teach them about how they should respond when those who are wayward and distant from God turn and come closer to God and God's grace. Today's reading included the first two of these parables; one being the story of a shepherd who rejoices when seeking and finding a sheep of his flock that had gone astray, and the other being a tale about a coin-collector who celebrates with her friends after seeking and finding a prized coin that had been lost. We read the third parable of the series, best known as the parable of the prodigal son, earlier this year in the season of Lent. In all of these stories, characters representing God -- a relentlessly loving father; a diligently coin-seeking woman; and a caring shepherd -- show us that God carefully and tirelessly seeks to find people when they are lost and that God celebrates upon finding them. The parables teach that we should respond in the same way, with joyful celebration whenever the lost are found, and not by burning with indignation, jealousy, or anger at God for unfairly welcoming and embracing the riff-raff.

But burning in response to God's grace falling upon others is easy for us to do. Like the Pharisees and scribes, we church-going folk try to be close to God, and we too often judge those whom we consider to be apart from God, either because they do not worship as we do, because they do not worship God at all, or because they idolize any number of things. We get especially judgmental against those who cause their own suffering or the suffering of others because of their own life choices, and we burn when God's mercy and grace unjustly come to them.

But who are we to burn by being so judgmental? Do we not also freely receive God's grace? Haven't we all, like the lost sheep, wandered away from God under our own power? And haven't we all, like the powerless lost coin, also experienced separation from God's goodness by what has been done to us by others or life circumstances. All of us have burned inside at times in our lives, by our own doing or not, experiencing hellish disconnection from God and the good life and peace that God intends for us to enjoy, but God has always sought after us to welcome us and embrace us, and God and the angels of heaven celebrate whenever we turn to receive God love. We should celebrate with heaven when we find ourselves close to God, and we should party hardest when others who are far from God come near. Wouldn't it be great if the world knew us not as judgmental hypocrites but as joyous partiers?

May our way here be to turn from our burning. May we turn from all that leads us away from God and causes us to burn inside. May we turn from burning against others in judgment. May we turn to using more of our energies to help those in the world who are lost and burning to see God's loving arms extended toward them. As we turn from our own burning, may our celebration of God's grace bring us joy and peace and make us more of a blessing to the world. Amen.