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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W34
17 Pentecost (Proper 19 C) 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 11 September 2016

Exod. 32:7-14
Ps. 51:1-11
1 Tim. 1:12-17
Lk. 15:1-10

My Weight Is My Love

"... I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Lk. 15).

What is worth dying for?¹ This question might help us decide how to live. Our job at Salesforce or Google or Facebook, our iPhones, the San Francisco 49ers or our success or good looks obviously are not worth it. Not too many of our neighbors would die for their religion or for their country any more. Twenty-first century America may be defined by no longer having anything worth dying for.

On Friday I was having lunch at the elegant apartment of a fashion designer and former Grace Cathedral trustee. It is a beautiful bright space with an interior staircase up to a solarium on the top floor. After delivering the other guests and visiting for five minutes I went down to re-park the car. This took longer than I expected. So I ran upstairs, went in, shut the door and then realized that there was a lot of Asian art that I hadn't noticed the first time.

I turned to the staircase, and there was no staircase. Just as I began to feel completely disoriented, a woman came down the hallway with a puzzled look on her face asking if I was someone who I had never heard of. In that instant her husband walked into the room, and I realized it. I was in the wrong apartment. I had no idea what to do so I simply explained that I was the dean of Grace Cathedral and that I was visiting her neighbor upstairs. We talked about all the people we know in common and I left feeling like I had made two new friends.

All of us at some point have experienced the sinking feeling of realizing we are lost. I have felt it in a New England forest at dusk, in the High Sierras and distant cities, and most of all as a child in a crowd of unfamiliar faces. Perhaps we are lost too when we have not found what is worth living or dying for.

There is a wonderful parallel between the first two sentences of today's gospel highlighted by Luke's use of alliteration. All of the sinners and tax collectors engizontes which means to come near to Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and scribes diagonguzon or grumble that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. These are the people who are lost and know they are lost, and the people who are lost but have not discovered it yet. They are you and me.

We use the word repentance to describe what is at stake but I sometimes wonder if that word has been worn out in the way that a lot of religious words have been. The Greek word is metanoia and means literally a changed soul. You might call this ecstatic transformation. Jesus explains with two examples. A shepherd leaves behind ninety-nine sheep to find the one who is lost. He rejoices as he hoists it on his shoulders and then again as he calls friends and neighbors to tell them the news.

A woman takes all the furniture out of her house to find a lost coin and calls her neighbors to celebrate. Jesus is trying to express the impossible - the joy God feels when we are no longer lost. Jesus wants you to know how deeply and irrationally God loves you.

Let me offer another example. Imagine that my wife Heidi as a law professor discovered that one of her undocumented immigrant law students was in danger of flunking out. What if she immediately cleared her schedule, stopped showing up to committee meetings and class so that she could spend more time tutoring this person. Imagine she worked with her every night until 11:30 p.m. in the library going over hypothetical cases and the law. Then when the student successfully graduated suppose Heidi exhausted all of our savings renting out the Fairmont Hotel so that the entire law school community could celebrate this one student's accomplishment?

On the one hand you might be irritated and identify with people Heidi neglected, but you cannot get away from the fact that she deeply loved this one student. Jesus wants us to feel the weight of this, not so that we grudgingly go around feeling indebted, but so that we fully experience God's love and rejoice in a life of purpose.

Today we are celebrating Homecoming Sunday. Our theme this year is home. It has given us a chance to learn more both about what home means in general and our own home. From a team of doctors who greet Middle Eastern refugees on the shores of Europe we heard that according to the United Nations there are 65 million refugees in our world today. That is one out of every 113 people on the planet.²

At our first Forum on September 25 we will continue our discussion on homeless with San Francisco's Jeff Kositsky first Director of Homelessness, Audrey Cooper the Editor-in-Chief of the Chronicle and Ken Reggio. We have talked about the earth as our home, gentrification and racism in San Francisco and the unique cultural contributions of this region.

This week I have been reading Harvard Government professor Nancy Rosenblum's book *Good Neighbors: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America* (2016). It makes me realize that the words home and neighbor exist in relation to and define each other. You simply cannot have one without the other. Rosenblum writes that neighbors *are* our environment. She describes home as a "fragile refuge" "where we are uniquely vulnerable and retreat is impossible."³ In a way home is a gift that we are always receiving, or failing to receive, from our neighbors.

Rosenblum writes about the most horrifying violations of our expectations concerning neighborliness. When Japanese Americans were moved to internment camps in World War II many of their neighbors did not even wave goodbye. Instead they looted and stole from them before they had even left town.

She quotes James Cameron an African American man who survived a mob's attempt to lynch him. The most upsetting part was that these were people he knew in town. He writes, "It is impossible to explain the impending crisis of sudden and terrifying death at the hands of people I had grown to love and respect as friends and neighbors." "I recognized... customers whose shoes I had shined many times... boys and girls I had

gone to school with were among the mob and neighbors whose lawns I had mowed and whose cars I had washed and polished.”⁴ Rosenblum also writes about people who behave in a truly heroic manner and risk their lives to save others.

For me what is most missing from Rosenblum’s world of terrible and good neighbors is any experience of the holy or the transcendent. It is as if she regards our neighbors as a small, unimportant distraction from the real business of living, which might involve for instance, working one’s way up to partner in the law firm, or getting tenure at Harvard. According to her we refrain from bothering our neighbors so that we can all accomplish great successes. But what if our neighbors, this area of our life that we regard as peripheral, really is the main thing?

Of all the writers in the first five centuries of Christianity St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) sounds most contemporary with our time. In his autobiography he writes about being utterly lost. He says that as a young man, “I was in love with the idea of a happy life.”⁵ And yet everything he did to satisfy this desire ended up making himself miserable.

In short, Augustine struggled deeply with lust. We all have our shortcomings perhaps you are greedy, have a bad temper, or you constantly compare yourself to other people, for Augustine it was sex. He believed that his worst fault was the way sex for him seemed completely out of control. Fifteen hundred years later he is still famous for praying, “God make me chaste... but not yet.”⁶

My friend, the history professor Margaret Miles says that Augustine experienced two conversions. In one he heard a child’s voice singing “Take and read.” When he opened the Bible to Romans 13:13-14, he read about abandoning drunkenness, sexual licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy and putting on Jesus Christ. He writes, “my heart was filled with a light of confidence and the shadows of my doubts were swept away.”⁷ But my friend Margaret says that Augustine experienced another even more powerful transformation.

Augustine realized that our shortcomings, our greed, envy, lust, sense of superiority, impatience and anger all arise out of the power that fear exercises in our lives. In his case lust came out of both his fear of missing out on something and his self-centeredness. His metanoia, his transformation, occurred when he realized that he could instead channel this energy into loving others. He could allow himself to be totally immersed in God. Augustine had a kind of mission statement for his life, “My weight is my love; by it I am carried wherever I am carried.” He began to allow God, and not his ego, to be the center of his life and to guide him.

For Augustine love is not a feeling. It is an action. He was not an expert at this right away but he realized that through daily decisions in each particular circumstance we can learn to participate in God’s love. We can love our neighbor. We can be part of how those around us find their home. This is how Augustine became a Christian, a follower of the God who is love. It is how he discovered what he would die for and what he would live for.

Rejoice. On this homecoming Sunday welcome sinners and eat with them. You are the one who chooses to draw near to Jesus and not to grumble about him. You are the coin that has been lost. You are the sheep that has been found again. Our weight is our love, by it we are carried home.

¹ This introduction and the material on St. Augustine comes from notes for a lecture called "To Die For: Bodies, Pleasures, and the Young Augustine," that Margaret Ruth Miles intends to deliver at Villanova University 16 September 2016.

² These statistics are for the end of 2015 and come from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/20/world/unhcr-displaced-peoples-report/>

³ Nancy Rosenblum, *Good Neighbors: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

⁵ Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* tr. Rex Warner (NY: Signet Classic, 2001), 188.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.