Sermon on Exodus 32:7-14, 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10  
*When “Good Enough” isn’t “Good Enough”*

Anyone here ever watch the old TV show, *The Lone Ranger?*

If you did you’ll remember the Lone Ranger’s sidekick, Tonto; proving that he wasn’t really a *lone* ranger; you’ll also probably remember his horse’s name: Silver!

Like the perfect foil that he is, Tonto claims that Silver is “unbreakable,” that there is a wilfulness and wildness about him that makes everyone give up.

But this, of course, is what intrigues the Lone Ranger; this becomes the horse for him. By some secret force he is able to reach Silver’s equine soul and so a lifelong devotion between man and horse is born.

And one senses that if the Lone Ranger can tame the untameable then any outlaw with whom the Lone Ranger tangles will find himself “tamed” as well.

We pick up something like this theme in our second reading.

God has called a violent, blaspheming man and persuaded him not only to become a believer but shaped him into a leader, God’s apostle to the Gentiles.

The Bible will often focus on worst-case scenarios in order to demonstrate the primacy and power of God.

And the good news of God, the preacher says in a kind of crescendo, is that there is nobody out there or in here whose heart is too hard, no anger so bitter, no habit so ingrained, no personality so warped that they remain outside of the reach of God’s mercy!

And I say “amen” to that! And if that is what you were or are, the Gospel offers you hope, “amazing grace for all us wretches.”

But I come to the texts today with a different question, “how is it that the rest of us, the ones who don’t think of themselves as ‘one of the worst,’ ‘one of the violent,’ a ‘blasphemer,’ who don’t think of themselves as one of those ‘who can’t be broken;’ how is that we can come to know the grace and mercy of God in our lives?”

I mean, on one level, we’re all sinners, I get it; we’re all in theoretical agreement, or, if we desire to be orthodox we’re all in agreement, that there’s no one here who doesn’t need God’s mercy.

But what I’m trying to be real about this morning is that most of us don’t live as if we need mercy and grace, or at least that much of it

Now, of course, we wouldn’t claim to be saints nor would we aspire to that; but look at us: here’s our goodness, the different ways we serve or have served, the different ways we help people.

Most of us like to think that we live in that vast space between super saint and violent blasphemer; we’re ordinary and we’re okay.

The last word of our gospel reading today is “repents” which we know means “changing our mind;” when we imagine that we’re “okay” we’re really putting this question out there: “why should I change when, for the most part, things are working as well as might be expected?”

Don’t get me wrong; *I* ask this question and I’m not here this morning to accuse or excuse; I’m here with you *in* that question; trapped by it as much as helped by it.

When the Israelites came to the mountain they thought of themselves as good people, they’d just voiced their support for the idea of a Covenant between the Lord and them; I mean, the Lord had just saved them from Pharaoh, it seemed a good idea! “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do,” they said confidently and with feeling.

But then something unexpected happened, their leader disappeared, didn’t show up to give them comfort and support after what they deemed an appropriate length of time and in their insecurity they became impatient and demanded of their clergy a quick fix.

And Aaron, wanting to protect his position caves with no fight as all (sigh, we clergy are always so co-optable; I mean you guys help me put food on the table!).

This is just an aside but I think congregations are suspicious that clergy will lay it on thick regarding their sin and though this can happen the far greater danger is the opposite of this, we should be suspicious if clergy are never challenging us.

Aaron clearly falls into this trap of trying to please, “I guess this is how the Lord is leading us; we’ll make an image of the Lord and this will be what will help us worship appropriately.”

“I’m sure that when Moses gets back, if he gets back, he’ll be pleased with our initiatives, he’ll be pleased with our planning and enthusiasm; he’ll congratulate us on our sacrificial giving for coming us with this golden calf!”

I joined someone on the golf course when I was in Halifax; he was an astrophysicist, turned financial guru; when he found out I was a priest he said, “so here’s the deal, if there is something after we die I think I’ve lived a good life, I think I’ve tried to be a good person; what do you think, that’s good enough, isn’t it?”

I was in an awkward spot; I didn’t know him, he was my golf partner with whom I’d have to keep up friendly conversation for the next couple of hours.

All I could think of doing was asking the question, “and how would any of us know that what we define as “good enough,” really is? Then, turning the screws a bit, I said, “many people who have ended up doing brutal things thought they were doing it for the right reasons and that they were therefore ‘good enough.”

There was silence and then a change of topic; I wasn’t trying to play “gotcha” but merely to illustrate the self-serving nature of all our own conceptions, all the ways our ego tries to excuse or rationalizes our choices.

The problem with human beings is precisely that we think we’re “good enough!” This is, on one level the heart of what the New Testament reveals about the human condition.

This is what we mean by “Sin,” capital s; what the Reformed tradition called “Total Depravity” the fact that right where we think we’re doing something great, right when we think we’re obeying the law and doing good, right when we think we’ve crafted a liturgy that helps us worship.

Just there we often get it wrong; in the case of the Israelites, it would have been no accident that the image they created of the Lord with their precious gold was suspiciously similar to the fertility gods of the area, the gods that promised growth and power but demanded violence and child sacrifice.

I find it instructive that the symbol that sits outside Wall Street and that is the icon of the economic system of our world and which many Christians take to be reflective of God’s intentions is a charging bull!

Not that there isn’t a lot of good in capitalism, not that there wasn’t a lot of good in the fertility religions of the ANE; their *and our* precise problem is thinking that it’s “good enough.”

The corner I’ve talked myself into in this homily is one in which, I humbly submit, we are all in the position not only of the ordinary Israelite worshipper but of Paul. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Paul says in his most famous letter to the Romans.

What I’m saying to you this morning is that our hope is not in ourselves, not in our religious proclivities, nor in our inherent goodness, though of course when I look out at you I see goodness everywhere.

What is the possibility of rescue from this trap; from this self-satisfied feeling that things are okay? Is it possible to be “good enough” but recognize that we’re still not “good enough?” That is, is it possible, to keep changing, to keep growing all through life so that our thoughts and actions are open to what truly is God’s vision of loving justice?

Yes! And I find that that yes is grounded in God, in Christ and in the presence of the Spirit in this community!

The Gospel, I find, is most clearly expressed when I say to you, “I Allen Doerksen (put your own name here), have been the subject of a careful, diligent, determined search of the Patient Love of God.

It is this patient determined love that identifies God and also shows us how this ongoing change might yet happen in us.

The threat of wrath voiced in our first reading must be real to some extent for patient love to exist; if there is no wrath there is no need for patience; just as if there is no threat of destruction, the offer of salvation makes very little sense.

It is in the ongoingness of God’s patient, determined pursuit that even *I* can change my mind. Some of the big ones for me that are still ongoing is becoming less angry, less reactive, more accepting of difference, more willing to listen to other’s ideas and even act on those ideas.

What we celebrate at this table is a love that means that not only extremes, not only the notorious can experience grace, but all of us who are ordinary, all of us who genuinely believe our ego’s facile, smug assurances of “good enough,” even we can be found!