

Risky Business

Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; Jeremiah 31:31-34
First, Brockville Ontario
November 20, 2016

INTRODUCTION

I have a dog, Peanut. He's a rescue dog who has challenged me time and again. He's afraid to trust anyone. I couldn't even touch him until I'd had him for two weeks and given him a sedative. Even now, he's still skittish with others. Somehow I have to help him realize that he's safe.

THE CHALLENGE

How many of you are parents – or foster parents?

I think being a parent or foster parent has to be one of the hardest and toughest jobs in the world. Younger children aren't that difficult. They tend to listen and obey – if they remember. Older children and youth, however, are a whole different entity. They challenge us and test us. They break rules – often quite deliberately – and watch for our reaction. Will we do as we preach? Will we preach one thing but do something quite different? Why should they listen to us?

Sometimes, things get so bad that we're faced with a decision:

- Do we use tough love to stop bad behaviour?
- focus on unconditional love, accepting anything they do?
- try to find other options?

The real challenge facing us is:

How do we convince them that our love is real? That they can trust us, and believe that nothing they ever do will ever separate them from our love? That we want only the best for them?

How do we convince them that we love and that it's safe for them to love us?

Take a moment to think of how hard that is.

- Being a parent – dealing with rebellious teens. It's hard but our experience provides a window onto God because God's facing the same challenge ... from us.
- How does he convince us that he loves us and that it's safe for us to love him?

GOD'S QUEST / OUR REJECTION

When God created us, he gave us the most marvelous gift that set the challenge into motion. He gave us freedom of choice – the freedom to say no to him – the freedom to reject him. And of course, we did – and do – time and again.

Think back to how you felt when you have ever been rejected – and we all have. How did it feel? How did you respond?

That’s another window onto God – because he knows what it is to be rejected, to have his love rejected.

Yes, he may have had a couple of rough starts (think: The FLOOD) – but, instead of turning his back on us and starting over with a new creation – God kept trying to reach us.

- through Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob;
- through Sarah, Rachel and Rebekkah;
- through Moses.

What we have in the Bible is a love story of God constantly reaching out to us. He started small ... with one person at a time ... with one family at a time ... and finally, during the Exodus, with one group of people at a time – the Jews (or ancient Israelites as they used to be known).

What we have in the Bible is a love story: God calling us to respond to his love – we responding, reaching out to God in return ... and then turning our backs on him when it got too scary and too uncomfortable to think of God ... or too boring so we started to look around at what others had.

We started out as God’s children – as God’s people. Somewhere, the imagery changed. God became our husband. But at some point in the story, we demanded a king – so we wouldn’t be different from the rest of the world. God was our King, but we couldn’t see him and didn’t want him. We wanted a human being – someone like us and someone we could see and recognize.

That rejection had to hurt God – but he gave us what we asked for. He may have considered himself to be our husband, but he stepped back and let us go, knowing how power tends to corrupt and knowing that eventually we would have the situation we see in Jeremiah.

GOD’S RESPONSE: TOUGH LOVE OR ALL-ACCEPTING LOVE

THE DILEMMA

Somewhere in the overall biblical story, we told God that we were old enough to make our own decisions – to stand on our own feet. We wanted to be independent ... or at least, subject to human rulers that we could safely ignore if we wanted to. We wanted to do our own thing and not worry about displeasing God.

Regardless of whether we want to see that rejection of God’s authority as teenage rebellion or a cheating wife, God was faced with the dilemma of how to respond – what do I do now?

- If I put my foot down, and say “do this or else” – what kind of relationship am I creating? Is this what I want?
- If I do nothing, then why should anyone take me seriously? Do I stand for anything?

TOUGH LOVE

In our Jeremiah text, we see God beginning with a warning:

- This is what you've done. This is the consequence.
If you don't want the consequence, then you need to change.

God doesn't warn the people directly – after all, they had already rejected him when they chose a king to rule them.

So he warns the king. He tells Jeremiah to write his warning on a scroll, to give the scroll to Baruch who will take it to court and give it to the king.

God knows what will happen. The king burns the scroll. But some in the court heard and responded – they worked to save Jeremiah and Baruch.

Jeremiah re-creates the scroll and it too finds its way to the king. That says something about God – he wasn't willing to give up on his people. He isn't willing to give up on us.

We know what happened from history. The king ignored the warnings. God put his tough love plan into action. When Judea's enemies struck, God did nothing to stop them. He stood by while his people – his love – suffered the consequences of their disobedience.

God's reaction is understandable – especially when we remember how we've felt when we've been rejected – but is this the kind of relationship we want with God? Where we stay faithful because we want him on our side – and know that if we don't, we'll suffer horrible consequences?

ALL-ACCEPTING LOVE

What if God had changed tactics? What if God had said,

I don't care what you do. I love you and will help you whenever you need it.

Well, God did. We can see that response in other prophetic books – a wife commits adultery and the husband says, "I don't care – I'll take you back, no matter what." This happens time and again – and we're left wondering, what kind of marriage is that?

What kind of relationship is that?

And we're back to the original question – how do you convince someone you love them and, assuming they love you too, how do you convince them that it's safe to love you – that it's worthwhile to love you?

RISKY BUSINESS

GOD'S RISK

The second part of our Scripture lesson is from Jeremiah, chapter 31. It shows us that God has found a third option – a way through the dilemma.

He won't take away our freedom of choice. He won't force us to do what he says or commands.

But he can change us – he can change our hearts to make it easier for us to see him and recognize him – to see and recognize his presence in the world. God does this by writing his law within our hearts.

He gives us a vision of what life in his kingdom – surrounded by and filled with love – would be like.

He gives us a glimmer of how deep his love is ... it cannot be contained to one person, one family, one group of people – God's love is so great that it fills the whole world ... all peoples everywhere.

And the offer – God's invitation to love – is still there. We still have the option of saying no, or only so far, or accepting him as our love.

God showed Jeremiah and us a third way of dealing with human beings. Make an adjustment to the game plan – change our hearts.

Most of us would like change to be instant. If we have to change, make it a quick change so we can get on with our new life. God doesn't work on our timetable. God is patient. He waited almost 600 years before implementing the next step: almost 600 years from Jeremiah to Jesus.

God came to us in person so we could get to know him in a much more personal and vulnerable way – as Jesus. And what did we do?

We killed him.

Loving someone is risky business. You risk not having your love returned. You risk being hurt, being rejected, being betrayed. And yet, God came to us in love.

Trying to convince someone of how real and unconditional your love is – that's even riskier. God put aside at least some of his power – he lived among us; he walked among us; ate with us; talked with us; and put himself into our hands and our power. God knew that we would eventually turn on him and kill him. But if that's what it took to convince us of just much God loved us, he was willing to die on the cross. And did.

OUR RISK

God invites us today to love him.

But it's hard for any of us to hear and accept. Like God, we've all been hurt ... rejected ... broken ... betrayed. Like God, we've trusted others, but somewhere we learned not to trust. Like God, we've become vulnerable, but unlike God, we learned to erect walls around the most vulnerable parts of ourselves.

God invites us to take the same risk he did – to tear down our walls, to trust again, and to risk loving again – whether it's our rebellious children, an adulterous spouse, a skittish animal, or God.

CONCLUSION

A musical came out years ago – Camelot: the story about a love triangle between King Arthur, his wife Guenevere, and his best knight, Lancelot.

I remember the song King Arthur sang when he could no longer pretend that Guenevere was faithful. He knew she was cheating on him, having an affair with Lancelot. But he also knew that deep down, she still loved him and that he loved her.

How to Handle a Woman? The answer – simply love her.

As we approach Advent this year, we celebrate God coming into the world as Jesus. We celebrate God's inviting us to come to him, and to believe in and accept his love for us. It's risky business.

As we leave the sanctuary this morning to go back to our own lives – as parents, foster parents, adopted pet parents, husbands and wives, and as single people called to love ...

Remember the questions:

- How to convince someone we're worth loving?
- How does God convince us he's worth loving?
- How will we respond?

Amen.