

September 15, 2013 – 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14; Psalms 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19; First Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32 or 15:1-10

In Puno, Peru recently, Marisol, mother of two young boys, provided refuge in her humble home to another mother with three children who had nowhere to go; her husband repeatedly lands in jail, and abuses her when he's "free." Marisol and her husband reflected the unconditional compassion and mercy for this vulnerable and broken woman and her children that our God of Love has for us.

Today's readings speak of God's mercy, but if we enter more profoundly into their wisdom, they invite us to be challenged and transformed. In the first reading, we hear one part of the long story of the journey of liberation from Egypt to the Promised Land. The Israelites created an idol to worship, hoping that it would lead them onward to the good life.

How many idols we create! Toward how many objects we direct our attention and energy, while turning away from the simple dream of God for our liberation and joy? Idols are seductive, as they try to represent our desires and ideals, but they in fact enslave us in an eternal frustration of unrealized dreams. Worse yet, idols can be projected as all-powerful (as the only thing that matters) or used to control others with fear or guilt.

In Peru, many idols have been created that have much power and control over the people on the margins. Neo-liberal policies of the central government place more value in foreign investment of extraction industries than in the livelihood of the people or care of creation. Land is sold for exploitation or "development" without consulting the indigenous peoples who live there, nor with any concern for environmental protection. Only long after the deals have been made in government offices do the people find out about them. Four lots have been approved and sold for gas exploration within Lake Titicaca; 40 percent of Peruvian land is granted as concessions to mining companies, the majority in indigenous regions with extremely high levels of poverty; and a recently signed contract with Brazil opens the doors for the construction of a massive hydroelectric dam that will exterminate 40 communities and damage the biodiversity in the region.

Rivers and soils are contaminated by gas and mining companies without any controls, destroying the already fragile ecosystems and food sources of people who have no alternatives. As a result, the majority of social conflicts in the area are due to environmental issues and extraction industries that use their power to threaten and control. The government has criminalized social protest, specifically of indigenous peoples trying to preserve their land and life. At the same time, masses of people living in poverty are lured by the prospect of quick money to enter the mining industry, risking harsh conditions and exploitation for the dream of a better life.

Today's readings remind us that any ideal that is held up as an absolute, including religious doctrine, serves only to exclude and reduce God to an idol. The parables of Jesus are a response to the religious leaders of his time who were criticizing the fact that he freely and intimately accompanied the excluded, those on the margins and impure because they did not or could not obey the idol that was created from the "official" understanding of the law. How common it is today to hear religious discourse or doctrine transformed into absolute idols that enslave others with violent images of God, rather than imperfect and ever-changing invitations to the freeing mercy of God.

Jesus makes clear that God is not an all-powerful and fear-inducing God. Rather God is Love, who in great compassion and mercy seeks out those who stray and celebrates when we return with humble hearts. This is a God who becomes vulnerable in order to give us the freedom to either choose life or to create idols that lead us away from God. These idols, as Paul tells us, make us arrogant toward others, persecutors of others who are different than us, and blasphemers in worshipping that which destroys instead of that which gives life. Our very freedom can enslave us to our idols.

In contrast, true liberation is found in becoming aware of our false desires and idols, denouncing them, and returning to the original dream of God for us: joy in sharing life with all creation. It is a humble walk of solidarity with our brothers and sisters of every culture and harmony with creation, requiring of us the humility to put more value in what is lost than in what we have, and to transform our loss into great joy within the embracing mercy of our God of love. In the midst of today's idols and challenges, we are called to prophetic witness and creative vision.

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