

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time: September 11, 2016

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“LOST SHEEP, LOST COIN, PRODIGAL SON”

Who among us has not lost something of great value: a treasured object, a trusted relationship, a loved one, a fervent hope ... ? Loss is one of the most common human experiences. Today's Gospel gives us three examples of loss: one sheep among many, one coin among several, one son (or is it two sons?) among two. Jesus' stories are parables; taking commonplace situations, but with a twist; surprising us, maybe even shocking us into an uncommon awareness; deceptively simple. He uses the Jewish literary convention of the “rule of three” – the third story being the most significant, interpreting the other two. Let us examine each in more detail.

In a job that was not seen as lofty or secure, the shepherd seems very imprudent. Would you do what he did? By leaving the ninety-nine sheep to wander, he risks losing a lot more than one. His investment strategy is very shaky. Who is his financial adviser? The woman uses precious oil to light a lamp, sweep the house, not rest until her one coin joins the other nine. She seems a bit obsessive. After all, that coin has no legs. It is not going anywhere. If only she had known a prayer to Saint Anthony! And the father: despite losing a son who has “disowned” him and devoured family property, this man is always on the lookout, watching and hoping, just in case the wastrel would find his way home. A father doting, not distant. Welcoming, not warning. Throwing a lavish party, honoring the wayward wanderer. And complicating matters, an older son who has stayed at home, dutifully working like a slave, reeking of resentment. He refers to the prodigal as “your son,” never as “my brother.” And though the father pleads with this stay-at-home son to “come to the party,” we have no idea if he ever does. A family in disarray, if ever there was one.

Several threads connect these three stories. In each, a key figure stands at the margins of his or her world. In that culture, a shepherd is seen as shifty, smelly, not welcome in polite society. In a patriarchal culture, a woman is perceived as not equal to a man, with few rights of her own. A young Jewish man who consorts with prostitutes and feeds pigs is not only physically unclean, but also ritually unclean, to be shunned rather than

embraced. For one reason or another, each lives on the fringes, outside society's accepted norms. Where do we meet them today?

The second thread is the threefold dynamic of losing something or someone, finding that something or someone and joyous celebration. Just as we do when we find that lost treasure, restored relationship or fulfilled hope.

But there is a third and most important thread. And that is *extravagant searching*. Many people might say "If I lose the ninety-nine, my return on investment is very low ... I have more pressing things to do than look for a single coin. It will turn up, and there is more where that came from ... I have a loyal son who has stuck by me in my old age. He deserves my attention and love. The other made his bed, let him lie in it."

We are surprised when, through these parables, Jesus turns our assumptions upside down. Logic does not prevail. Through the stories, Jesus proclaims the extravagant love of God, a God symbolized by the risky shepherd, the determined woman and the welcoming father. Here is the God of Israel and of Jesus – seeing each of us of great value, crazy for love of all his people. This God knows that we are more precious than our deeds or misdeeds, more valuable than our failures or our accomplishments. "*It was not because you were greater than any others that the Lord set his heart on you ... it was because the Lord loved you (Deut. 7-8).*" Extravagant, unmerited love. What a consolation in our world where honor, prestige and getting to the top are the measure of one's worth.

What does all of this have to do with us? In our families, neighborhoods, jobs and faith community, we meet loss, often daily. We have infinite opportunities to mirror God's extravagant love. Layoffs from work, limited possibilities to achieve "the American Dream" fuel a cynicism that pervades current speech and action. Calls for healing reach us from many directions. We see the loneliness of aging parishioners, widowed and outliving their friends; the plight of a parent, made newly single through divorce; the struggle of a teenager to know and accept his or her sexual identity. We learn of the loss of a brilliant future in the wake of a serious diagnosis. Do we, as members of the Body of Christ, reach out to these and other persons in our midst, in plain sight? Do we extend the compassion of God in the most tragic moments of people's lives? As church, do we welcome without judgment those whose lifestyles and circumstances are different from ours? Do we "bring life" to lives deadened by rancor or despair?

On a global level, the sense of loss and need for healing are acute. Attacks across our planet result in a shared loss of a sense of safety, and often a mistrust of “the other.” Do we succumb to bigotry, painting an entire people with the same brush, casting a suspicious eye on neighbors who dress or pray differently than we do? As church, we are stewards of a world interconnected as never before. Do we advocate for justice, counter prejudice, work toward the common good and provide a voice for the voiceless in these uncertain days?

Like the shepherd in today’s Gospel, each and all of us can seek out the one person in our immediate world who seems most lost. Like the determined woman, each and all of us can work tirelessly for policies and attitudes that favor those most hidden in the corners of our society. Like the compassionate father, each can offer the stubborn presence of a God who does not give up on his children at their most vulnerable. We can image a God powerful and compassionate enough to become one of us in Jesus Christ. As the Christmas carol says, *“He knows our pain, to our weakness he is no stranger.”* As followers of this God, we have the privilege of working to heal people and our planet in and through his name. This is a calling to be found, and a finding in which to rejoice.