

24C 2019 SML
LK 15:1-32

There are four types of persons who miss their mark in the world, as revealed in three back to back parables found in this evening's/morning's gospel:

1. the lost sheep,
2. the lost coins,
3. the prodigal son
4. and the older son.

Some are lost through stupidity and thoughtlessness, like the sheep who do not intentionally wander away.

The second type of errant soul is illustrated in the parable of the lost coins. Sheep may lose themselves, but a coin is not lost through its own fault, but generally through the carelessness of others. To this group belong those who are led astray by:

- ✓ those who are more influential,
- ✓ those who are older,
- ✓ or those who are envied.

And woe to the influential, the older and the envied; it would be better if a millstone were tied around their necks and they were thrown into the sea. (LK 17:2)

A third class, described in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is composed of those who go astray neither through thoughtlessness nor through the fault of others, but by deliberate choice. Refusing to accept parental advice, they ask for their share of the money now, to enjoy what is called their “own freedom” and to make their “own life” as the prodigal who went off into “a distant country.” In the original Greek, “a distant country” is literally “the big emptiness,” or “the great abandonment,” far from the world of the father, far from the world of God. Cut off from the source of grace, clinging desperately to what we think we deserve, we necessarily lose the little we have. In short order, the prodigal son finds himself destitute, starving and alone. He who wanted his freedom is now a slave, and so desperate, he hires himself out to tend the swine, an unspeakable indignity for a Jewish man. The prodigal son hit his rock bottom, as it is described in terms of addiction.

“Coming to his senses, he thought,” the prodigal son makes a conversion. He doesn’t try another far away country, another “big emptiness;” he realizes he was free when he was at home, as his father’s servants are freer than he is now. He realizes that as far away from home as he was in “the big

emptiness” is how far away he was from his moral compass. He finds his moral compass pointing to his father and the true freedom of being his son. Not letting him finish his confession, the father knows the interior conversion his son had made.

Permit me to make this aside analogy.

Baxter Kruger, author of The Shack (a great summer reading book in 2007), shares a story that speaks of the Father-Son relationship we all share with God the Father:

I was reading the newspaper in the airport, waiting for my brother who was coming for a visit. Of the many people scurrying about, I happened to notice a young man in his mid to late 30s. He was nervous, walking back and forth every five minutes or so. Finally he relaxed, positioning himself 30 feet in front of the terminal doors in the middle of a group of others. As I put the paper down to watch, the doors opened and a few folks came through. Then there was a steady stream of people, some running to make their connection, some not sure which way to go, some smiling, obviously thrilled to be back home. The crowd began to thin, and the dad began to look anxious. Then it happened. A little boy, the spitting image of his dad, appeared by himself in the doorway. Standing perfectly still, he scanned the crowd like a deer in the headlights. I heard his dad shout something, probably his name. The boy heard his dad’s voice and started running across the airport. To me it seemed like everything in the airport went into slow motion and I had the perfect seat to watch it. The little boy’s eyes were full of delight as he ran. He dad

stood there with a huge smile on his face and open arms. No one could have watched this without tears. The boy dropped his bag and jumped into his dad's arms. They kissed. They cried. They laughed . . .

When I read this, it occurred to me, that's prodigal son coming home from the big emptiness!

The fourth class who miss their mark in this world is illustrated in the same parable by the older son who is unconscious that he is a sinner, though all too conscious of the sin of his brother. He is aware of the splinter in his brother's eye, but oh so not aware of the beam in his own. There was no record in the story as told by Our Blessed Lord that the younger son had wasted his money on harlots, but when the elder son protested, he added that charge. Neither does he speak of his brother, but he speaks of his "father's son," which is just so passive aggressive on the older son's part.

Conscious of his brother's sin, he was unconscious of:

- ✓ the wandering in the big emptiness,
- ✓ his hitting rock bottom,
- ✓ his conversion,
- ✓ his inner transformation,
- ✓ and his new discovery.

The older son only sees the injustice, which betrays that he too probably dreamt of a freedom without limits, that his obedience made him inwardly bitter, and he has no awareness of the grace of being home and the true freedom he has always enjoyed as a son.

So the Parable of the Prodigal Son is, therefore, the story of two brothers who thought they lost their father's love, one brother because he was too good, and the other brother because he was too bad.

The pattern of two brothers, one good, the other bad, is found throughout the scriptures:

- ✓ Cain and Abel
- ✓ Ishmael and Isaac
- ✓ Esau and Jacob
- ✓ the eleven sons and Joseph
- ✓ the two brothers in Matthew's parable: one brother who says he wants to do his father's will but does not do it out; the other brother who says no to the father's will, but has second thoughts, and carries it out.

It's the drama of free will and using the grace God gives us, like the father of these two sons, to show we are men and

women of character and uprightness, who can choose good over evil.

Fulton Sheen said it best:

Evil in the world “seems” to be an argument against the power, righteousness and justice of God, but it only “seems.” Evil is one of the consequences of a moral universe where freedom reigns, and where character emerges by the right use of freedom.