

## **September 15, 2019**

Ex 32:7-11,13-14; 1 Tim 1:12-17; Lk 15:1-32

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells three parables. The parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the Prodigal Son. All of these reflect on God's joy over the recovery of what was lost. All explain God's happiness over the one who has strayed returning, they all show that God's great love for each person is held individually such that one missing one is felt and noticed by God. The shepherd, the woman, and the father all are images of God and are models of the searching that God does for the lost (in the shepherd), the cleaning away of obstacles to be found (in the woman), and the persistent waiting for the voluntary return of the strayed (in the father). Today we might focus ourselves on our own attitude towards those who are lost - and maybe also what we do to be found by God ourselves.

Many people we know are lost. What is our attitude towards them? Do we help them be found, do we clear away obstacles to reconciliation, do we wait patiently for their return? This can be difficult especially when the person is a friend or relative that has hurt us. Before I was a priest I worked as a therapist and started a non-profit to assist at-risk young adults. One of these young men rose to a position of responsibility in the agency, and had a tremendous degree of trust from me. At some point his older ways caused him to steal from us and in the end was part of the reason the agency no longer exists. I was angry with him and vowed to never speak to him again especially if he ever tried to contact me to reconcile. Sometimes when I was meditating in prayer I would think of what I would do if we met. My human tendencies told me to ignore him and refuse to listen to any attempt at reconciliation he would offer. But then I think of what would be God's response - even more deeply, I think about what has been God's response to me when I have abused the confidence God has placed in me.

This is exactly the sentiment that St. Paul is making in the second reading. Paul says he was the worst of sinners, yet Jesus welcomed him back with open arms. So in God's eyes there is no one so far gone who can't be forgiven by God. If we are conforming ourselves to the image of God within us then there should be no one we should hold back from forgiving. I know that this is a tough thing. The fact is that the longer we hold back forgiveness from another, the more it eats at us on some level. Maybe that is why I kept grumbling about this person those years later - the lack of forgiveness causes us to hold on to the hurt, it reduces our freedom, it blocks

our love. If we have decisions in us that reduce our freedom to act, if we have things in us that block the free flow of love to another human being - then we are in some way separated from the God who is love itself. Then we become the one who is in some way lost.

But you might say: I know where I am .. I'm right here! What do you mean lost? When we separate ourselves from God, we are like the sheep, the coin, the prodigal son - we are where we are - but not where we were meant to be. We are not in the flock, we are not with the one who made us and owns us, we are not in the arms of the loving father who will provide for us. That's lost. It is interesting that one of the ways to be found by God is to find another. When we seek out the other, clear a path of communication, and wait with open arms for reconciliation, we become less separate from God as well. By forgiving someone that we have a grievance against we restore the flow of love, we open ourselves to God who flows in that love, we break free of the slavery to our anger and resentment. When we find them, God finds us. As we say in the Our Father: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

This is a beautiful point about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We could spend many homilies on this, and we agreed in Bible study that it was a "juicy" passage. In this story there is one who is clearly lost - the younger son - no doubt about it. The Father who represents God is waiting for his return and celebrates when he has him back (like the woman holds a party when she finds the coin). The other one who becomes lost is the older brother who because of his reluctance to let go of resentment has left himself out of the party. Notice that the father comes to him, and pleads with him to reconcile with his brother - it is only in that reconciliation that he will be able to share in the feast of the father. The father is reconciling his children to himself, and reconciling them to each other. He takes a risk to do so (like the shepherd risks leaving the 99 to go after the one), but believes that risk is worth it.

So one day, working on a homily about forgiveness, I could not help think of the young man I mentioned before. I reached out and located him, and we met and reconciled. I forgave him, and in that a weight was removed from my soul, and a blockage to love was cleared. It is a bit hard to come down off the high horse of "I'll never talk to that guy again," but there's something freeing about risking to love. I will be praying as I receive the Lord in the Eucharist today that Jesus will help me to seek out other lost ones in my life. Taking this attitude, instead of bitterness we can experience a sense of expectation - a hope that as we allow ourselves to find another we can look forward to be found ourselves, by the God of love and reconciliation.