

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

If we are not careful, we can understand the parables in today's Gospel in such a way that we miss a larger reality. Particularly when it comes to the last parable, which tradition has entitled "The Parable of the Prodigal Son."

The title does not go back to Jesus. He simply starts the story, "A man had two sons...." If we let Jesus tell the story as he intends, we can be led to a conclusion that goes beyond simply talking about repentance and forgiveness in the life of an individual, to one that gives us a glimpse of the larger task that God has set himself to: restoration of the whole world and everything within it to a wholeness that was lost with Adam and Eve.

The first two parables can help us in that regard because, strictly speaking, neither of them have to do with sin and forgiveness. We lose coins. Sheep get lost. In ordinary life we don't tend to ascribe any moral importance to such events.

That leads me to believe that Jesus is trying to convey a truth that does not deny the importance of the process of conversion, but which focuses more on what really lies in the heart of God—that there be a reconstitution of the whole of creation as it was originally intended.

Finding the lost coin to get the number back to the original ten is worth more than simply the value of the one coin that was lost. Finding the lost sheep to get the number back to the original 100 is worth something in addition to the value of the individual sheep that went missing.

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That's what God is after—that his creation arrive at the fullness of the process he had in mind from the very beginning.

For me this is like the desire on the part of my parents, and my mom especially, to have all her kids together at the same occasion. There was some added value to that that went beyond just missing the one who was not there. Maybe that maternal desire is an echo of God's own parental interest. It has to come from somewhere.

When we take the parables in this fashion, it has an effect on how we view our mission, as individuals, but particularly as a parish. We've taken upon ourselves as a parish the desire to be present in our community according to a Franciscan spirituality, and Francis knew quite clearly the importance of restoring things—run-down churches at first, but then the Church as a whole—to their proper dimensions and functions.

We are entering the Fall stewardship process, which has included the United Catholic Appeal for quite some time, but which we have focused on more recently as it applies to stewardship of our parish and its mission.

For the parish portion of the process we've chosen as our banner theme "Forward in Faith," which is designed to help us focus on what we need to do together to move forward into that wholeness and restoration that God so desires.

We've identified areas of our parish's life and activity that show great signs of life, but which need further attention to really move forward. We've made great strides, for example, to make St. Ben's a parish where families, with

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young children particularly, will find a welcome. I think last year was the first year since I arrived that we had more baptisms than funerals.

But that success has brought to the fore additional needs—baby-sitting services, for example, so that those same families with young children can participate in the parish’s programming such as adult faith formation, or the young adult ministry that is also coming to life in new ways.

“Forward in faith” also helps us focus on emerging needs that might otherwise get overlooked because we have not noticed that things in the surrounding society have changed.

Our ministry to young parishioners in the middle school years has begun moving toward a model that previously was used with the high school youth. It contains dimensions that go beyond the Sunday catechetical input, to include service projects and outreach, retreats and prayer experiences, and social activities. We’ve come to recognize that many middle-schoolers are being confronted now with issues that used to emerge much later.

One of the main ones of these is the question of whether a person is going to live life from a perspective of faith or decide early on that they can do without it. Some kids have already made the decision against being a believer by the time they become teens.

We have a great middle school ministry! And with the necessary resources they will be able to do even better and making sure that the faith gets handed on in ways that stick.

I recognize that the culture of St. Ben’s is already strongly

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oriented to sharing resources. The level of participation, not only in the UCA, but in last year's parish stewardship process, goes way beyond what any of the experts would have predicted. I thank you for that!

Within the next week or so you will be receiving in the mail a brochure that highlights the parish's ministry opportunities, financial data, ways to give and emerging opportunities.

Please review the materials thoroughly and take advantage of this annual practice to reflect on how your giving has been and whether you might be able to sacrifice something more for the work of moving forward in faith that we have committed ourselves to.