

Homily for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
St. Thomas the Apostle Church – West Springfield, Massachusetts
September 15, 2019



Scripture Readings: Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14 ✱ Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19 ✱ 1 Timothy 1:12-17 ✱ Luke 15:1-32

Have you ever been in a group listening to a joke, and, when the person gives the punch line, everyone laughs or grins; but you didn't get it? You smile awkwardly as you try to figure out why everyone is laughing. Somewhere, somehow, you didn't grasp some detail that was central to the twist that made the story funny. You quickly go over it again in your mind to see what little thing you must have missed.

It's almost like an ice cream company years ago whose slogan was, "It's the subtle little difference that makes all the difference." They claimed that there was some secret in their ice cream formula that, no matter how apparently similar it was to other ice creams, there was the slightest difference that made ALL the difference in the flavor of their ice cream.

And, that is precisely what Jesus' parables are. They are intended to inspire the listener in a new way. But each has a very subtle twist, which requires attention to details, or you won't 'get' Jesus' teaching or challenge.

So it is today. We have heard these parables of forgiveness so many times that we may have missed Jesus' real point. But we might ask: Is it even proper to call them parables of "forgiveness"? We hear it said: "Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So, to them he addressed this parable."

Those to whom Jesus addressed the parables were the complainers, the leaders and

people who didn't want sinners to have a place in Jesus' life and ministry. The parable is NOT a word to sinners about God's mercy; it is a parable of challenge and judgment to anyone who lacks mercy. The images of a shepherd seeking his one lost sheep, the woman searching for her one lost coin, the father welcoming back the promiscuous son, are all meant to challenge these religious leaders out of their righteousness, their unwillingness to accept a God whose mercy and hospitality extends to all peoples in all times.

From the earliest experience of Israel in the desert in our first reading, through the amazing mercy that Paul acknowledges in the second reading, God has always been, first and foremost, God of mercy, God of patience, God, who seeks out the lost. How then, Jesus demands of the leaders of his time, do you dare to create a god of *your* rules, *your* narrowness, *your* elitism, and ignore the true God?

For us, then, today becomes a Sunday of self-reflection. If we have been or are now in sin, God's mercy is seeking us, searching for our deepest souls, with a love beyond imagining, ready to receive and welcome us no less than Jesus welcomed sinners in his time.

If, however, we are leading lights of the Church, of the parish, of the diocese, the examination must be about our hospitality or lack thereof to those "outside" our system. No matter how wise and true and accurate our teaching, our moral laws, our Church norms, we must be people of mercy and welcome as we answer the call to lead others to the life and light of Christ. ✱