

## Lost and Found

Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-11; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Psalm 51 is King David's psalm, prayed with tears pouring down his face, crushed to his knees after Nathan confronts him about his affair with Bathsheba.

It is the psalm of the Jewish people who trade in the living God for a golden calf, after they come to their senses, after Moses intercedes for them, turning away a ferociously mad God, ferociously mad because his dream for them, for us, is freedom, and we seem addicted to making idols of gold, fame and fortune....

It is Paul's psalm as he recalls the happy warrior he once was, as he joyfully killed the followers of Jesus, until Christ put him on his backside, and blinded him for three long days so that Paul might finally come to see that it's love, not the law, that saves.

It is my psalm too, as I reflect on my own life of failed relationships, disappointed expectations and loss.

Perhaps for some of you – it is your psalm too...

"Have mercy on me Lord, according to your loving kindness...."

This really is the first step in the life of faith.

It begins by facing up to our own failures, and our profound need for mercy, which, lo and behold, opens the door to a new kind of life.

It's peeking into that door, into that new life, that today's gospel takes us.

Here is Jesus, partying with tax collectors and whores and who knows who else, while the dudley DO rights of the day stand by and tsk tsk the whole scene.

Don't get the wrong idea, Jesus knows full well that his table mates are indeed sinners, people who have fallen short of the mark, people who live outside the law, people who maybe aren't so nice, who might even stab you in the back if given half the chance.

Yet what separates them from the tsk tskers is that they know who and what they are....which is actually the first step in any program of spiritual development.

Just like the first step in AA is to acknowledge that one has lost control over alcohol, just so, the first step toward the kingdom is to acknowledge that we are the lost, the confused, the bewildered.

The show begins with the Pharisees who are upset with Jesus for having burgers and fries with the riffraff.

Because, for the Pharisees, and for many Christians today, religion is all about what people need to do to please God, and hanging out with riffraff is not high on that list.

Religion, way back when and still today, hands out rules and regulations, creates insiders and outsiders, defining the saved and the damned....

And Jesus says: "Look, you've got it completely wrong!"

The lamb is lost.

The coin is lost.

And while we may be tempted to see ourselves as the searching shepherd or the searching housewife, or among the sheep that remain or the coins in the purse; in fact, Jesus is inviting us to try these stories on as if I am the lost lamb, as if you are the missing coin.

"Try them on that way," says Jesus, "because that's how God sees us all."

Just listen to what the Holy Spirit, through St. Paul, says about our human condition:

"There are none who are righteous, no not one."

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Or, when Jesus says to the Pharisees, 'If you were blind, you wouldn't have sin, but because you say, 'we see,' your sin remains.'"

God is the shepherd; God is the housewife, (and if you're wondering about the 99 who need no repentance, see the quotes above!)

So I ask you, fellow sheep — fellow coins, what do lost sheep and lost coins DO, because that is the \$64,000 question that religion asks:

"What am I doing to earn (and thus deserve!) my salvation?"

Are they doing good works, deserving to be found?

Are they hollering for help?

Nope.

Lost sheep are as good as dead because left alone, they are dinner for the next lion, tiger or bear who wanders by, so they hide, quietly...

Lost coins are inanimate objects, they just lay there.

All of the effort comes from the one who's doing the searching, the one who's doing the finding, and that one is God.

And that, my friends, is why the Christian faith is not a religion, because according to Jesus, it's not we who seek God -- it's God, always and everywhere, seeking us.

Religion says: "you're in charge of your own salvation!"

Jesus brings us to the lap of God who foolishly, lavishly, and mercifully, loves us.

'OH SURE!" you're thinking, "then what about repentance?"

"That's what we need to do to get right with God, right?"

Well, sort of.....but the repentance Jesus calls us to is not so much about cleaning up our act as it is about metanoia -- Greek for "to change my mind."

To change my mind about the entire nature of God's relationship with us -- and our relationship with each other!

Jesus doesn't start a new religion, Jesus puts an end to religion by putting an end to sacrifices and personal merit and just desserts -- by trading all of that in -- for life -- for an abundant life; now, by taking the plunge and participating in the life God is pouring into our very midst.

It's there in Paul's almost giddy letter written to young Timothy.

Paul is amazed to be judged as faithful even though just the other day he's on the warpath against the followers of Jesus.

Paul is amazed that God shows him mercy despite his history as a missionary of murder.

And what Paul is telling young Timmy, he's telling the most jaded or damaged or angry or hopeless man or woman here:

"If God can have mercy on me, God will have mercy on you; if God can find me, God will certainly find you."

So, if salvation doesn't depend on me earning brownie points with God, then why am I cooling my jets here every Sunday?

Why pledge my hard earned money?

Why help others if God has it all in the bag anyway?

Why indeed?

If it's all about mercy, and not about merit, we can begin to let go of the tit for tat relationships that we most of us live in every single day.

We can exhale, relax, and get in the party mood that God and the angels have been throwing since before time began.

If we receive mercy for free, then isn't it the most natural thing to give mercy for free?

If our salvation is unearned by our own efforts, can we give an unearned embrace (or food or money or a shoulder to cry on) to those standing next to us?

And perhaps these stories are about this too.

When the 1 out of 100, the 1 out of 10, is found, what was incomplete is again made whole — the missing piece is back, just as the Pharisees who are able to hear what Jesus is saying can now join in the party with Jesus and all the other sinners, a community made whole once again....just as through Jesus, God in the flesh, heaven and earth are reunited, the simple meal of bread and wine becoming the very Body of Christ.

And perhaps there is this too...

"What or who have you lost in your life?"

Maybe one in your household is lost....if so, do your best to find her.

Don't wait for an apology, it may never come.

Don't wait till you feel like forgiving, that may never happen....

Don't dawdle on what happened yesterday, it cannot be changed...

Instead, have lunch, celebrate, invite others to come along, because by doing these things, you plant seeds of reconciliation, and who knows what those seeds may become....?" J. Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 69, paraphrased.

The law given to Israel became a system of rewards and punishment, and religion, as practiced by most Christians today, does the same thing.

The law makes lawyers out of everyone; looking for loopholes, trying to squeak by with the least effort, setting up walls between the just and the unjust.

It doesn't work.

The law turns people into lawyers -- but grace turns people into lovers.

And everyone knows that lovers always have more fun at parties than lawyers; and it's a party that God is preparing for every last one of us.

So, the word from the Lord this morning seems to be: "relax!"

"Lighten up!"

".... for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom!" Lk. 12:32.

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