

**Year C: Proper 19a Jer 4:11-12, 22-28; Ps 14; 1Tim 1:12-17; Lk 15:1-10
St Barnabas, Florissant – September 15, 2019**

Focus Sentence: Divine compassion has no limit.

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

What is the true meaning of the lost and the found in today's Gospel passage? Jesus calls sinners to repentance --- something that sheep and coins can't do. C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, explains it this way:

"This repentance, this willing submission to humiliation and a kind of death, is not something that God demands of you *before* He will take you back and which He could let you off if He chose: It is simply a description of what going back to [God] is like. If you ask God to take you back without [repentance], you are really asking [God] to let you go back *without* going back. It cannot happen."

And so, the Gospel message is one of total love, of relentless pursuit, and of reunion that leads to joy eternal. In God's story of redemption, the lost are not only found --- they are brought HOME!

PAUSE

Our Gospel passage tells us that "tax collectors and sinners" were gathering near to listen to Jesus' teaching. The Pharisees and scribes, as usual, objected: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!"

And yet --- being the kind of person found by God surely beats the smugness of the self-righteous any day. It might seem like a downer to find ourselves numbered with the sinners ... but what other kind of people can be found in this world? And besides, it's all a matter of which direction we're headed --- not where we've come from.

PAUSE

Today's parables are Stories of the Lost and Found at the Gospel Junction. In his classic definition, Frederick Buechner says it best: "*The Gospel is bad news before it is good news.*" It is the news that [the face we see in the mirror] is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob. That is the tragedy. But it is also the news that [we are] loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for. That is the comedy. And yet, so what?" Buechner further affirms: "...It is impossible for anybody to leave behind the darkness of the world he carries on his back like a snail, but for God all things are possible." (from *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, Harper, 1977).

These parables are graphic word pictures that, as Buecher has put it, begin with the bad stuff. They depict loss in all its isolation and despair. Yet if there is no set-up to the story, no lack, no lostness --- then there are no sinners ripe to be found at any address.

If, for instance, the one lost sheep had had the good sense of self-protection that the other ninety-nine possessed, there wouldn't be a story, there'd be no reckless venture by the single-minded shepherd. And there would have been no corresponding joy when the bleating, lost animal was found.

And the same with the coin: if the drachma had not slipped off the woman's necklace and rolled into the dark recesses of the house, its owner would not have frantically dropped everything to search for it --- nor rung up her neighbors to share in her exultation when it was found.

Each of these little tales reveals to us the God who cares, who searches us out, who NEVER gives up on us. And through the process of bearing with the story, Jesus' audience is able to learn from him something of the boundless scope of the Divine compassion ... the love of God reaching out to them, even as Jesus speaks.

PAUSE

Albert Nolan has written in his book *Jesus Before Christianity* (Orbis Books, 2011): Compassion is the basis of truth. The experience of compassion is the experience of suffering or feeling *with* someone. To suffer or feel with humanity, nature and God, is to be in tune with the rhythms and impulses of life. This is also the experience of solidarity, solidarity with humanity, nature and God. It makes a person at one with reality and therefore true and authentic in himself.”

Being *found* by God changes everything. Being loved by God into repentance turns us around, reestablishes our position, rewrites our address.

When we find the courage to realize that WE stand with the sinners Jesus describes, then we can accept that the fairy tale, the tragedy AND the triumph, is about us and our destiny. We can acknowledge that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, has delivered us and will continue to go to any lengths to bring us back.

PAUSE

One of the most striking features in the twin parables of The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin is that *sheep and coins don't repent*. They don't “come to their senses” and “turn around” and “make a new start” on their own. Unlike the prodigal son, they don't get hungry, decide they've had enough, and reason out a plan to find their way back to where they ought to be. They don't find *themselves*; they are FOUND.

The point here --- and the point that always seems to make the “righteous” grumble in any and all religions --- is that we are loved by God into repentance. We are SAVED BY GRACE, costly grace, and not by our own half-baked, quasi-successful efforts at repentance. ... The search only “ends” when we are “found.”

And Jesus asserts, “I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Coming to Jesus, sisters and brothers, is coming HOME.

AMEN