

ECHOING GOD’S WORD
in
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY
Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 11, 2022

Lectionary Readings:

Exodus 32:7 – 11, 13-14
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-32

God does not punish sinners who repent.
Christ came to save sinners.
Heaven rejoices over one repentant sinner.

Luke:

Let us situate this passage in Luke’s Gospel: On the journey toward Jerusalem where Jesus will enter into his ultimate encounter with the Father, Jesus forms his disciples in the meaning and values by which they must live in order to achieve their own ultimate encounter with God. The Church is being shaped by the deeds and the teachings of the Lord Jesus as it journeys with him toward the kingdom of God.

To what extent can we permit God to be merciful and forgiving? Surely, there must be limits! A sovereign and almighty God must have certain reservations about whom he will forgive. It is not decent that a God should be too free with his mercy! It may lead to abuses. People will take advantage of God if God appears too eager to forgive. People might even be tempted to devalue God’s mercy if God is too liberal in granting it. Who would continue to have respect for God if God does not stand up for himself and withhold forgiveness until we have earned it? That is precisely how we would set up our God if it were up to us. In fact, we do it all the time, still, after twenty centuries of hearing the teachings of Jesus!

Jesus has an answer: God is indeed foolish! God has gone stark raving mad! God has lost it! God is like a shepherd who abandons the 99 sheep in order to seek out the one who has wandered. God is like that crazy woman who throws a party for her friends when she has found a mere coin that was lost. God is a Jewish father who loses his mind for the love of a child who has betrayed him by becoming a Gentile, of all things!

Can you just picture Jesus losing *his* control when the Pharisees and the scribes once more begin to harp on the fact that he associates, even eats, with sinners and tax collectors? He goes crazy. He tells these three outrageous stories about God’s mercy.

Luke never hesitates to place a parable involving a woman as an image of God in parallel with one of a man in that role. How surprising that must have seemed in a culture where women had no legal standing, where women did not exercise political, economic, or religious leadership. The parable of the shepherd, presumably a man, who lost a sheep, is followed immediately by the parable of the lost coin involving a woman. Notice how we even fail to refer to this parable as the *Parable of the Woman who had found a Coin she had Lost!*

The God who forgives so easily is not even grim about it! The theme of all three parables is about the joy that God experiences when the sinner is found and is forgiven. One would think that Jesus would have talked about the joy of those who were lost, who have been found, and have been forgiven. No! The stories are about the joy of God! The teaching consists in emphasizing the reality of God’s kingdom, which is really all about celebrating and partying with God.

The *Lost Sheep* and the *Lost Coin* do not even have to do with anything in order to be found.

They just have to be lost. Our role in the repentance that leads to forgiveness is displayed very clearly, though, in the parable of the *Prodigal Son*: he must come to his senses; he must recognize his desperate situation even if it is only for the pain he is in. Pain can be the beginning of change! He makes a decision to return, to leave his wandering behind him, to go to his father, to ask only for what is strictly necessary for survival.

Older son versus younger son is familiar in Scripture: Esau and Jacob; Joseph and his brothers. Conflict can only be resolved by forgiveness. If we hold out for an absolute restoration of all our rights and compensation for all our grievances, we will wait forever.

Exodus:

Even after having experienced the mighty saving deeds of God on their behalf, the people of Israel wandered away from God in idolatry at the very foot of Mount Sinai where God had just confirmed his love for them in the Covenant enactments. Their sin was that they wanted a god they could control, one that was visible when they wanted to see him, one they could put away when they did not. God seeks them out again and forgives them.

Timothy:

Paul offers himself as an example of those who have been sought out and forgiven by God. While he was pursuing the followers of Jesus for their destruction, Jesus was pursuing him for his salvation. Not only was Paul forgiven, but he was even appointed to the exalted position of proclaiming salvation for all in the name of Jesus.

Questions for Discussion

1. Are you familiar with the practices of shepherds who watch over their flocks as they would the very members of their families, with pet names for those who always tend to get in trouble, with special care for those that are sick? If you do not have first-hand knowledge of the practices of shepherding, what image would you use to describe a loving God who “goes crazy with concern” should one of his people get lost?

2. Have you had the experience of the pain that comes from “losing” a child to drugs, alcohol, criminal behavior, reckless living, rebelliousness, or the abandoning of family values? Can you identify with the mother or father waiting up at night for a son or daughter who is “running around with a fast crowd?” Can you imagine the joy that comes to a parent when such a “lost” child enters upon a path of rehabilitation and recovery? Discuss the feelings you would have if this were to happen in your family.

3. Discuss the implications of these parables for the Church: Has the Church itself sometimes acted like the “lost” sheep, coin, or son? Can we be grateful that God has loved the Church, has been patient with it, has allowed it “to come to its senses and strike out on the path of return?” Does the Church itself “throw a party” when one of its members repents and seeks forgiveness? Discuss the Eucharist as the “party of rejoicing!”

Suggestion for Christian Action

Ask the director of liturgy in your parish to include intentions in the Prayers of the Faithful for children who have disappeared. Suggest also that their families and all who love them be included in the prayers of the community.

PRAYER

**Loving Father,
Do not cease to seek me when I have wandered away.
Come after me.
You know that I really want to be found!**

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

Repentance and forgiveness: in our experience of God's love, we have often found that this love is expressed as mercy and compassion. We need God's love most when we are in need of forgiveness. At times, we hesitate to approach God for forgiveness, especially when we are not yet ready to repent. It is our craving for love that makes us approach God and begin the process of repentance that will lead to forgiveness.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Merciful Father, Jesus gives us the model for our repentance which will lead to divine forgiveness.

The heart of the parable is to be found in the feelings, words, and actions of the merciful Father. Here, we have Jesus' own understanding of who God is. The freedom that the father allows his son to exercise when he wants his independence; the generosity with which he endows the son before the son has any right to his portion of the inheritance; the longing and patience with which the father waits for the son's return; the silent conviction that the wandering son will return someday; the eagerness with which the father goes out to meet the son "halfway," as it were; the extravagance with which the father celebrates the son's return; the mild reproof addressed to the older son; the comparing of the son's departure and return with dying and rising.

As sinners, we find ourselves mirrored in the words and deeds of the prodigal son and of the unloving other brother. We have been fascinated, even obsessed, with desire for what appears to be "goods outside the household of God." We even use God's gifts of freedom and the resources of God's creation to assert our independence from God. We choose to wander off into territories that are alien to our nature. When disaster strikes, it takes time for us to realize that we were better off before our so-called "freedom." Wallowing in deprivation or in pain, we have an opportunity to figure out what our options are. God is still there for us, finally, as our only viable alternative.

Perhaps, we are more like the older son who resents the father's love and mercy for the repentant son. Like the angry son, we may refuse to call the repentant sinner our brother, choosing to say, "This son of yours has returned." We may even be willing to remind God of all the sins our brothers and sisters have committed rather than rejoicing in their repentance and forgiveness.

The process of conversion and forgiveness found in the parable can be verified in our own experience.

See **The Catechism: #1439**