

Pentecost 16 Homily

(September 12, 2010)

Fr. Rylan notes that he does, at times, take liberties with the text during the preaching, so this text may not be exactly the same as delivered.

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever lost something? Perhaps it was something valuable, either monetarily or maybe its value lay more in sentimental currency. A piece of jewellery, a trinket, a photo or some work files you have been working on for some time, or dread of dreads your keys and wallet. You're sure you sat them right there.

First comes frozen panic. Glued to the spot your brain begins to go over the usual places in the house you would normally set the item. When that turns up nothing, the brain goes to the most recent places you have been where you might have had the item with you. If there is no fruit from that you begin thinking about more obscure places, because God knows you've placed things in some peculiar spots before.

Finally, when the mind is fuzzy and everything and nothing seems right, you kick into action, actively and frantically tearing through house, car, office and so on looking high and low, under and over, in and through. Determination begins to set in enhanced by the feeling like you have lost a small part of yourself. And you swear you won't give up before it is found, its value is just too high.

If this has happened to you then you can relate to how the shepherd and the woman of Jesus' parable felt. The shepherd lost a sheep. It is no small thing to lose a whole sheep. That little ball of fluff was worth more than an entire year's wages for that shepherd. Wait till he has to tell his employer, or his father or whoever it was he worked for. That could lead to any number of unpleasant consequences – from a severe tongue-lashing to...well...a lashing and maybe worse.

It is no wonder then that the shepherd immediately drops everything and without a moment's hesitation heads out to look for the lost sheep. With a determined persistence he looks "until he finds it." There is no giving up. He is not coming back until he is successful. It is a big risk leaving the other ninety-nine alone unguarded, but it is a risk worth taking because of the value of even one sheep.

Then there is the woman who lost the coin. This is no ordinary coin but a silver one, otherwise known as a drachma. One of these drachmas represented about ten days' wages and many

months of saving. So this one lost coin will cost her vital items of necessity such as food and clothing.

Can you imagine losing a month's savings? How would you feel? Pretty frantic I bet. So she lights the lamp (which costs her in use of fuel), pulls out the broom and dust pan and gets sweeping. She also, Jesus tells us, continues to look until she finds the coin. There is no quitting. The coin is just too valuable.

There are some pretty remarkable things about Our Lord's parable this morning. The first is that the shepherd and the woman are both metaphors for God. This is remarkable because a shepherd was the lowest of the low. Seen as uncouth and untrustworthy they find their place in that society amongst the sinners and tax collectors. Then there is the woman. To be blunt, women were second-class citizens and not obvious examples or metaphors for God.

So then why would Christ use these two persons if it was going to unsettle his hearers by shocking their sensitivities? Well, because it was going to unsettle his hearers by shock their sensitivities. The people listening to his parable were Pharisees and scribes – the religious leaders. The ones, who established religious and moral custom, set the spiritual tone and formulated the rules of the community.

It was to them that Christ addressed his parable in response to their grumbling about his eating with sinners and tax collectors. He did so to reveal the most remarkable thing of all: that God feels about and behaves toward the lost sinners as the shepherd and woman their sheep and coin respectively.

For God, to lose one human being is a tragedy he cannot bear. It is like losing a part of himself. So God leaves the rest of the flock in order to go and search for the lost sheep and he will keep searching until he finds it. God does so because that one sinful, lost sheep is absolutely worth the risk.

One sinner is so precious to God, that he will light the lamps of heaven and earth, sweep the dusty corners, overturn the chairs and check between cushions until he finds it. In other words, God will not give up on a sinner, whoever the sinner is. God will not settle for one being lost, but with persistence will go after that one. It's this quality of God that caused one poet to call God "the Hound of Heaven."

Now we might not be immediately offended by this quality of God and his attitude towards the lost, especially if we were that sheep and are now back in the fold. But what if that sheep or that coin was Hitler? Or Stalin? What if you get to heaven and find Marc Lepine the perpetrator of

the *École Polytechnique* massacre, or your abusive spouse or your mortal enemy? Are you offended now?

The whole thing actually is disconcerting. So it must have been to those priests and writers, the Pharisees and scribes, who murmured when tax collectors and sinners—of all people—were gathering around to hear Jesus. “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Harrumph.

Then he regales us with stories of a lost penitent, more celebrated than 99 of us righteous and a recovered coin more pleasing to the angels than nine coins never lost. As a final insult, Jesus caps off his sermon with the story of that spoiled kid, the prodigal son.

Yet here is God rejoicing over the return of a lost sinner – irrespective of who that sinner is. The joy of finding is so abundant that it cannot be contained; one person alone cannot adequately celebrate it; there must be a party to which others are invited.

“When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’” Can you be too lost? No.

Would we rejoice with God if that lost sheep that we despise walked into the church seeking forgiveness? Would we rejoice over his or her conversion? Would we come to the party or stand sulking outside like the older brother of the prodigal, stamping our feet and refusing to eat and be merry?

We would if we could hold ourselves in the same light as St. Paul does in his letter to Timothy. Yet in truth, as Fr. John Kavanaugh, S. J. said, “One need not be St. Paul, once a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man filled with arrogance, to thank God for being treated mercifully in this life and hereafter. One need not be as derelict or depraved as Moses’ stiff-necked bunch worshipping a molten calf, to appreciate God’s forgiveness.

High in grace or sunken in sin, we all know the kind of favour Jesus granted in overflowing measure. “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost.” Can we be too lost? No.

We can all say with Paul, “But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.”

How we respond to the sinners and tax-collectors – the lost sheep and silver coin, whether by grumbling or rejoicing, reveal our own attitude towards Christ and the mercy he has shown us

when he left the flock and swept the house to find us.

There is something good in the worst of us and something bad in the best of us. Thus each of us, in little and large ways, ought to be thankful for unmerited love and leave the accounting to God.