



Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time September 11, 2016 C

IMAGES OF A SEARCHING AND JOYOUS GOD

If the long version of today's Gospel was proclaimed in church today, then you listened to three stories that spoke very powerfully of a God who goes out searching for his lost sheep and dances with joy when he finds them.

According to Luke, Jesus tells these parables because the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, are having serious difficulties with Jesus' attitude and behavior when it comes to sinners. The Pharisees (which means "separated ones") distance themselves from sinners lest they become unclean. But Jesus sits with them and eats with them. This is unthinkable behavior.

The Shepherd Out Searching for his Lost Sheep

I love this parable for it reminds me of my childhood, when my siblings went with my father in search of a sheep that strayed and got lost in another farmer's field. We didn't wait for the lost sheep to return but instead went out in search of it. We were glad when we found that lost sheep.

Jesus uses the image of the shepherd leaving his 99 other sheep to search for the lost one to depict a *searching God* out looking for his lost sheep. The great English poet Francis Thompson (1859-1907) was himself a lost sheep until God found him. Thompson, who later became a Jesuit priest, reflected on his experience of running from his searching God in his famous poem *The Hound of Heaven*. He writes:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot precipitated
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong feet that followed, followed after.*

Eventually, Thompson stopped running and allowed his searching God to find him.

The Joy of the Shepherd

When the shepherd finds his lost sheep, he is *filled with joy*. In fact, he is so overjoyed that he calls his neighbors to share his joy. When someone returns to the Sacrament of Reconciliation after many years, I often say to that person: "Your return today is cause of much joy in heaven." Rather than beating up on ourselves for some sin, we ought to be focusing on the joy that our repentance is causing in heaven.

The Woman and the Lost Coin

This is an exact parallel of the previous story. Again, we see a woman *searching* madly for her lost coin, and then finding it, she is filled with *joy*. This particular parable is also special and unique because it is one of the very few times in Scripture when God is imaged as a woman. Most, if not all of us, think of God as a man. Yet God, who is Pure Spirit, is neither male nor female. (CCC #239)

The Searching and Joyous Father

Our third and best known parable also portrays a God who 'goes out' in search of his lost *sons*. The father could have waited for his lost younger son to come crawling to his door. But catching sight of his wayward son—while he is "still a long way off"—the father is "filled with compassion, runs to his son, embraces him and kisses him." Again, we notice a father *going out* to meet his lost son rather than waiting for him to come home. Then he embraces him and kisses him and throws a huge celebration for the son who had hurt him so much by leaving. We who tend to be a little less emotional might say that this was a bit over the top.

The father also 'goes out' to the elder son, who is in a big sulk over the treatment that his younger brother is receiving. Again, the father could have said, "Let him get over it. I am not going to reach out to him." But he does because it is part of God's nature to search out for his lost sheep.

Reflection Questions

1. To what extent do we tend to think of God in the manner he is portrayed in these parables? When we have distanced ourselves from God, do we tend to imagine him as *out searching for us*, or do we think that he is *waiting for us* to return home?
2. When we have repented of sin, do we tend to think of our repentance as causing joy in heaven, or do we see God forgiving us— though begrudgingly—like the way we might forgive someone who has hurt us?

Images of God

All of us operate out of a particular image of God just as we operate out of images of people in our lives. For example, there are some people we would not share our faults with because, rightly or wrongly, we tend to think of them as being judgmental or unforgiving. When it comes to our relationship with God, it would be helpful if we take some time to think about our image of God. When it comes to dealing with serious failings in our lives, it would help us if we internalize in our hearts the ‘searching and joyous’ image of God that is so powerfully present in the three parables of Luke 15.

Finding ourselves in the main characters of the parables

St Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, used to encourage his retreatants to look for themselves in the stories that Jesus told. He would ask: “Where are you in that story?”

- To what extent are you like the shepherd, the woman, and the father who went out in search of the lost sheep, coin and son? Or do you tend to wait for those who have offended you to come crawling back to you?
- To what extent are you like the prodigal son, the wild one who for years wasted his father’s gifts or had been a lousy steward of this father’s gifts?
- To what extent are you like the elder son who thinks that his dutifulness places God in his debt. If something really bad happens to us, we might understandably ask God: “How could you have allowed this bad thing to happen to me after all these years of faithfulness to you?” To what extent are we like the elder son who is quick to judge and take the moral inventory of those whom he judges to be less committed to God and Church than us?

Does the parable give us an image of a God soft on sin?

Today’s parable could easily communicate to us an image of a God who is soft on sin. We may wonder if the father was too lenient with a son who had committed a terrible crime against him. Any of us could be easily tempted to stray if mercy were so easily had. So let’s look a little deeper.

Yes, indeed, the father is exultant that his son “*who was dead has come back to life*” but it is also clear that he expects his son to leave his dissolute lifestyle behind.

The son is welcomed home, but he is also expected to change—just as at Baptism when every neophyte (new born) Christian is clothed in Christ, that he/she might not only begin a new life of peace, truthfulness, justice and joy, but also renounce a contrary life replete with darkness, division, falsehood and gloom.

The clothing of the prodigal son in the finest robe represents not only a fresh start but also a break with a destructive past. The father welcomes his son home not so that he can repeat the past, but that he can reconstruct the future in hope. The father’s wonderful show of mercy must be met by the son’s commitment to letting go his past and beginning to learn anew what it means to be a son. A son who was a drug addict deserves his parents’ forgiveness.

Winners and losers

In our competitive society, it seems that there always has to be “winners” and “losers.” In this story, God reaches out to *both* sons—he loves *both* of them. Unfortunately, the elder son interprets his father’s outreach to his younger brother as his loss (which might be akin to our reaction to an employer who shares concern for employees less dedicated and faithful than us). In God’s eyes, the embrace of the younger son does not mean the rejection of the elder. In the same vein, God’s special love for the poor does not mean that he doesn’t love the rich. God loves the “haves” and the “have nots,” the “good” and the “bad,” the “faithful” and the “unfaithful.” Does that offend us?

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Aaron