

FROM THE PASTOR'S



24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – September 16, 2007 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.

Luke tells us that Jesus told these parables because the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, were having serious difficulties with Jesus' attitude and behavior when it came to sinners. The Pharisees (which means "separated one") separated themselves from sinners in case they would become unclean. But Jesus sat with them and ate with them. This was 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. Instead we went out in search of the lost one. We were glad when we found the lost sheep.

Jesus used the image of the shepherd leaving his 99 sheep to search for the lost one to give his listeners an image of 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. Later, Thompson who 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 them: "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 Coins

This story is an exact parallel of the previous story. Again we notice a woman *searching* madly for her lost coin and then we notice her *joy* after she has found what was lost. 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 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. He could have waited for his lost younger son to come crawling to his door. When the father caught sight of his wayward son, he was "still a long way off." Then Luke says "filled with compassion, the father runs to his son, embraced him and kissed 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 older 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 did because it is a part of God's nature to search out for his lost sheep.

Reflection Questions

- 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 image God as *out searching for us* or do we tend to image God as *waiting for us* to return home?
- When we have repented of sin, do we tend to think of our repentance as causing joy in heaven or do we tend to see God as forgiving us but in a begrudging way - in a 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 *image* them as not understanding us or as being judgmental. When it comes to our relationship with God, it would be helpful for us to take some time to think about the images of God we operate out of. When it comes to us dealing with serious failings in our lives, it would be most helpful to us if we had internalized in our hearts the ‘searching and joyous’ images of God that are 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 the gifts the father gave him, who for years was a lousy steward of the 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: ‘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, not only that he/she might begin a new life of peace, truthfulness, justice and joy, but also that they may renounce a contrary life that is darkness, division, falsehood and gloom.

The clothing of the prodigal son in the finest robe indicates 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 is a drug addict is forgiven by his parents.

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 him loosing (an analogy might be 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 older. Likewise, 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?

School Envelope Report: This past August a new envelope for support of our school was added to our monthly envelope package. Donations received in August totaled \$6,448.00. I am most grateful to all who donated. Due to a drop in enrollment, we are in big need of this help. If you did not participate in August and you are in a position to do so, please consider doing so. Thank you again for helping us to educate the future leaders of our church and society.

Have a blessed week,

