

Homily for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 10/11 2016

“Pazzo D’Amore”

Exodus 32:7–11, 13–14
Psalm 51:3–4, 12–13, 17, 19
1 Timothy 1:12–17
Luke 15:1–32

Have you ever lost something of value that so affected your day you could not think of anything else? There was the time when I lost my keys in the morning. I looked everywhere for them, but could not find them. Consequently I was housebound and spent the better part of 6 hours looking everywhere for them. When I wasn’t looking, I was fretting...

At around 3:30 I decided to start making dinner and went down to the freezer to get out some meat. There in the freezer basket were my keys. I had placed a number of items in the freezer first thing in the morning and had absent-mindedly placed my keys down in the freezer while putting things away. I was so happy to find my keys that I texted family and friends who knew about my loss, so that they would rejoice with me. That which was lost was now found!

I am sure most of you can remember something you have lost that so preoccupied your thinking that it nagged at you.

Today Jesus tells us three stories that are all about someone or something that was lost and was then found. He tells these stories because many who had been lost were coming to Jesus. St. Luke tells us that the tax collectors and sinners were all coming near to listen to him. Here were people whose lives were marked by attitudes, actions and lifestyles that the religious elites, referred to in the next verse, could not countenance.

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

The opening of this passage provides a cautionary warning. People who are religiously observant can be those most zealous in their condemnation of people who are on the periphery of society and the church. Rather than being dismissive and condemnatory of such people Jesus wants us to call to mind the experiences we have had when we are looking for something that is lost.

We are to cultivate the heart of Jesus when thinking about people lost to God. A heart, like that of Moses, who knows Aaron and the people have blown it big time. Even still he acts as a mediator between Yahweh and the people so that the Lord relents of his anger and does not exact the kind of punishment the people deserved. Through the intercession of Moses, mercy triumphed over judgment. Moses anticipates the even greater mediator – Jesus. His table

fellowship with sinners declared just how burdened God is on finding lost souls. A burden shared by a shepherd, a woman and a father.

All three of these characters are, when you think of it, kind of loopy when seen from a rational human perspective. Think for instance of the shepherd and Jesus' question:

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

I was thinking about this question during the week and came up with the answer only a stupid shepherd would leave 99 healthy sheep and go searching for the one lost sheep. It is bad agriculture not to mention bad economics. What if, while searching for the one, 45 others get lost? Sheep are not the sharpest tools in the shed. It seems that this shepherd needs a refresher course in sheep-tending 101.

Then there is the woman who turns her house upside down looking for a coin that would be the equivalent of a dime, or maybe a 25 cent piece. Upon finding it she throws a party for her neighbours. Can you imagine a friend saying to you, "come on over to my house, I am having a party". And when you ask, "What's the occasion?" the answer comes back, "We are celebrating the lost quarter I found". You might think twice about showing up at his house. What kind of loony toon is that guy?

Then there is the Father of this kid who wants dad dead so he can get his inheritance. Instead, he gets dad to cough up the cash he takes off to a distant land and blows it all. Now here is dad, back at home, waiting for that kid to return. Months pass, still no sign of junior. And then one day, there he is way in the distant coming down the road. This dad seems over the top in his reaction – especially given how this kid had acted. Think of the indignity, the insult and the mistreatment he had received from that boy! It is time to give that kid what he has coming to him. But no it doesn't happen that way. Instead the boy is welcomed home and it is celebration time.

Of course the point of each of these stories is that God is the one who is constantly searching to the point that he seems like a shepherd, woman and father who are preoccupied with finding that which is lost. And that is just the point. St. Catherine of Sienna said that God is:

“pazzo d’amore”

“crazy in love”

Crazy in love with us! So much so that he is like a shepherd willing to leave 99 sheep in order to look for the one. So much so, that a coin of little value is worth turning the house upside down and then throwing a party after it has been found. So much so, that he is like the father of this disreputable - obnoxious kid, who upon his home coming does not just get a peanut butter and jam sandwich and a glass of milk, but filet mignon and Cabernet Sauvignon!

Pazzo ‘d’amore – “crazy in love” is this God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ that he will search and search, for that sheep or coin and wait and wait for that crazy teen to return.

Let’s take another look at these stories from a different perspective as representative of different kinds of lost-ness.

Let’s look at the coin. A coin is an inanimate object. When it is lost it does not know it is lost. Sometimes people find themselves in this kind of situation. People who are spiritually dead, who are so far from God and alienated from their real purpose they do not even know they are lost. They are completely insensitive to the movement of the searching Holy Spirit.

There are so many like this today who spiritually are like the lost coin. That have no sense that they are primarily spiritual beings with souls that are eternal. They are living life on a purely material plain.

You may have family, friends and work colleagues who are like them. It is important to remember that God is *pazzo d’amore* – *crazy in love* – for them, like the woman wanting to turn the house upside down to find them.

Then there are people like the sheep. Sheep are sentient beings, with mobility and sense but are not highly developed.

I remember once hiking in Northern Ireland where sheep are in abundance. One sheep was all by its lonesome stuck on a hill, bleating away. It was crying out for help.

There are people, especially when they get to midlife can be like this bleating sheep. Their state of lost-ness is movingly captured by Dante Alighieri in the 14th century poetic masterpiece “The Divine Comedy”. The poem begins:

*Midway in our life’s journey,
I went astray from the straight road
and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood. How shall I say what wood that was! I never
saw so drear, so rank, so arduous a wilderness! Its very memory gives a shape to fear.¹*

Like that sheep that has gone astray the protagonist of this poem has gone astray. Maybe you are in this place today. Your life is like that dark wood, so drear, so rank and arduous. God is like that shepherd. He is looking for you because he is *pazzo d’amore* - *crazy in love*.

Then there is the son. He is a high functioning sentient being. He has willfully turned away from God in rebellion and self-asserting willfulness. Although he knows the heart of his father he rejects his paternal home, rejects his father and leaves. How many today are like this? Those who have rejected God because they want to live their lives free of what they see as the restraints and do their own thing?

¹ Dante Alighieri. The Divine Comedy: Purgatory v. 2 (pp. 16-17). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

And yet here God is also on the lookout. Rather than turning his back on such people and changing the locks on the door to keep them out of his home, he is continually waiting and looking for their return.

Perhaps you are lost in this way but have come to Mass because you want to return home. God could not be more pleased because he is *pazzo d'amore* – *crazy in love* with you.

God is so crazy in love with us. As each of these stories tells us, joy is the quality that emanates from heaven when the lost are found. Joy a word in Greek that is pronounced this way: “Chara”. Joy a word that is so close to the Greek word for Grace which is “Charis”. Chara/Joy – Charis/Grace the words that are the centre of the special word we use to describe the Mass: Eucharist.

This is the meal of joy, this is the meal of grace. This is that table spread by God where the lost come together to celebrate that God is *pazzo d'amore-crazy in love*.

Nothing delights God more than the finding of lost souls, a discovery of far greater value than keys, a coin or a sheep.