

Homily for September 15, 2019
24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

It's the Father's Nature to Save

Once upon a time there was an old man who used to meditate each day by the Ganges River in India.

One morning he saw a scorpion floating on the water. When the scorpion drifted near the old man, he reached to rescue it but was stung by the scorpion. A bit later he tried again and was stung again, the bite swelling his hand painfully and giving him much pain. Another man passing by saw what was happening and yelled at the mediator, "Hey, stupid old man, what's wrong with you? Only a fool would risk his life for sake of an ugly, evil creature. Don't you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?"

The old man calmly replied, "My friend, just because it is in the scorpion's nature to sting, does not change my nature to save."

It is in God's nature to save - because it is in God's nature to love. God seeks the lost, heals the wounded, forgives the offender, and gives hope to those who are in despair.

It is what God does because of who God is.

It is this theme that is at the heart of today's Gospel. Think about God's willingness to save. In the Parables of Jesus, they often have what is called the twist, the unexpected dimension of the story that leaves the listener saying: "What???" This is especially so with the Lost and Found Parables of Luke 15.

Because many of us have become so familiar with these stories we can miss the twist – that is the parable's surprise element.

But think about it. There is a shepherd who has 100 sheep. He leaves 99 – note – in the wilderness – not in the sheepfold – to go after the one that is lost. When Jesus asks the question, "Which of you would not go after the one that was lost, they would have answered, "none of us. That would be the dumbest thing ever. By the time we return there might be 45 more sheep that would be wandering the fields".

It would be a crazy thing to do, like rescuing a scorpion.

Then there is the woman who turns the house upside down for what might be at the most the equivalent of twenty dollars. Okay, we might imagine taking the time to look for a lost twenty, but to then call your friends in for a party that might cost four times as much. It just doesn't make sense.

Then there is the Father who has had his son say to him, "Pops I wish you were dead and seeing as how you aren't going to croak any time soon Old Man, I want my share of the inheritance now, and I want nothing more to do with you. How would you be feeling if treated like this by your teenage or young adult kid? Pretty steamed, right? But what does this Father do. He waits

and waits for the kid to return home. While he sees junior a long way off, Jesus says, the father ran out to him, hugged him and welcomed him home. But wait a minute. Where was the lecture, the reprimand? I can understand the attitude of the older brother.... This son of yours has treated you with such disdain and look at what you do? You serve him filet mignon, fine wine and have all the neighbours over for dinner. The same neighbours who had been talking with each other about how disrespectful that boy of yours has been.

So often we have the conception of God that he is primarily upset with us and really just waiting to give us that lecture, to tell us how bad we have been. But he is not that angry father wanting to light into us. No he is like the seemingly reckless shepherd, loopy woman and extravagant Father.

Remember how St. Paul came to experience the reckless, loopy, extravagant mercy of Jesus? I love this play on words:

that in me, as the foremost of sinners, Jesus Christ might display his utmost patience

There is an old Jewish legend where God took into counsel the Angels that stood about his throne to discuss the creation of man. The Angel of Justice said; 'Create him not ... for if you do he will commit all kinds of wickedness against his fellow man; he will be hard and cruel and dishonest and unrighteous.' The Angel of Truth said, 'Create him not ... for he will be false and deceitful to his brothers and sisters and even to Thee.' The Angel of Holiness stood and said; 'Create him not ... he will follow that which is impure in your sight, and dishonor you to your face.'

Then stepped forward the Angel of Mercy, God's most beloved, angel, and said; 'Create him, our Heavenly Father, for when he sins and turns from the path of right and truth and holiness I will take him tenderly by the hand, and speak loving words to him, and then lead him back to you.'

This is what is at the heart of these parables. God longs to find and save that which is lost, because well – it's his nature for us to be led back to Him.

Now think about each of the lost characters in our parable.

The lost coin is inanimate and has no feeling at all. In other words it doesn't know that it's lost. There are many people like that today. They have no sense of there being a God who loves them and is turning the house upside down in searching for them. Then there are those who like the lost sheep, have a sense they are lost. Have you ever heard a bleating sheep that has been separated from the fold? It knows something is wrong but has no idea how to rectify the situation. The shepherd is in search of this sheep, wanting to welcome him back into the fold. Then there is the son who is wilfully lost. He has chosen to reject the father's love and run from home. But notice this, the parable focuses on the son disproportionate to the sheep and coin. Why is that? Because I think at some time and in some way people have either rejected the promptings of God's love or have actively and wilfully turned away from Jesus and the Church. What does Jesus think about us when we do this? Is he angry? No he longs for us to return and come home. And for those who like the older brother are at home, rather than disdaining the Father's generosity the Church is to emulate that one whose nature is to save.

Because the lost sheep and the lost coin are more than the prized possessions of their owners; they are also parts of a whole. The sheep belongs to the flock and the coin to the purse; without them the whole is not complete. The search, then, is a quest for restoration and wholeness. In this sense, all of us who are part of God's creation should be just as anxious as God until the lost are restored and we are made whole again by their presence. Then, with brooms in hand, we can answer God's call, "Rejoice with me." And with the Father we can open wide the banquet hall of grace and declare:

Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; ²³ and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; ²⁴ for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.