

**First Impressions**    24<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY -C-  
Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14    Psalm 51    I Timothy 1: 12-17    Luke 15: 1-32  
*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

Sometimes less is more. Today's gospel has three significant parables: The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost or Prodigal Son. It is a long reading, so I have opted to begin my preparations focusing on the shorter version offered in the Lectionary, which consists of the first two parables (15: 1-10). Perhaps next time I come to this Sunday, I will focus on the Prodigal Son. On the other hand, you might like to proclaim the reading of all three for the overall effect of the clear message of divine mercy that emerges.

The setting for Jesus' telling the parables is dramatic and fraught with tension. Luke tells us that the outsiders are, "all drawing near to listen to Jesus." Not just a few, mind you, but ALL. Those who would normally be excluded from a religious setting and the company of the devout, are universally attracted to Jesus and what he has to tell them about God. Those who object to Jesus' whole ministry complain, "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them." If Jesus had just collected food to give to them, that would have been called charity. Then the Pharisees and scribes would have called him a kind and good person. But no, Jesus hosted tax collectors and sinners. They drew near and he did not back away for fear of being contaminated by them. This holy man would even sit and eat with unholy people!

The opening setting for today's parables reminds us that those of us gathered to hear the Word of God and who will draw close to the table to eat, are both the "holy" and the "unholy" at the same time. We hear the parables and experience the welcome Jesus offers and the renewal he gives us when we receive him today once again into our hearts. The God Jesus is describing has an open heart and open arms for us. Those who drew close to Jesus didn't have to do something to make God love, them, God already did. God is crazy in love with sinners and today's parables show just how intense that love is. It drives God to take seeming irrational risks just to get sinners back.

The "religious experts" are also in today's audience, listening and observing what Jesus says and does. Can't you see their miffed expressions as "all" those sinners start elbowing their way closer to hear and see Jesus? The religious elite were sure they knew how God thought and acted towards sinners. When Jesus tells parables each parable is like someone shouting to the Pharisees and scribes, "Surprise! You've got God all wrong." (Younger folks today are more succinct, they would just say, "Wrong!" —with a special inflection of their voices.)

As we have been traveling with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem we note that the religious authorities have been testing him and complaining that he does not keep the religious observances. They resent that he has an open-door policy to sinners. In fact, the door isn't just open, the parables show a God willing to go out the door to search for and to draw sinners in. And when sinners respond to the invitation, when they are finally "found," there is rejoicing among friends and neighbors. Or at least there should be!

It's not as if religious people don't also need to respond to God's invitation to mercy. The first reading makes that very clear. The golden calf incident and its consequences, take up quite a bit of space in the Exodus account—chapters 32-34. The chosen people's disobedience to God did not just happen once. It is a theme running throughout the bible. The people God chose to be God's own, who were not only to live faithful lives, but also be a "light to the nations," repeatedly fall short of their calling. As does the church---the community called through Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection---right up to this present day. Exodus shows how unfaithful the people were and how constant is God's fidelity to them, always ready to forgive and take them back.

The people have been unfaithful, and Exodus tells us God's "wrath" is ready to "blaze up against them to consume them." We are told that Moses has to intervene to save the people and that God "relented" and did not punish them. But you know what? As I read this passage, I don't think it was Moses who got God to change plans. I think God was more than willing to forgive the people's transgressions. It is just God's nature to do that. If we doubt it, we can listen to the parables in which Jesus proclaims the same God Moses proclaimed to the people.

The first parable, about the lost sheep, is a lovely story. We urban moderns have cozy feelings when we think about shepherds and sheep. Our hearts are stirred by the one sheep that gets lost and are touched by the shepherd's going out "after the lost one until he finds it." Not to disturb our reverie—but, Jesus' opponents wouldn't have had those feelings. For them, shepherds were ritually unclean, and they despised them. John J. Pilch (cf. Below), suggests that there is more than a little sarcasm in Jesus' opening comment to the Pharisees, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one....? They would never liken themselves to shepherds, even if the shepherd were depicted as loving and self-sacrificing.

There is a small word with a lot of meaning in the shepherd story----"until." Jesus describes the shepherd going after the lost sheep, "UNTIL he finds it." One gets the sense the shepherd is not going to give up on the search. The same word appears in the lost coin parable. The woman searches for the coin "UNTIL she finds it." (If you also include the story of the Prodigal Son

today, you get an implied sense that the father wasn't going to give up his watch for his son until he saw him coming up the road.) Judging from the woman's search for the coin, God is relentless. She conducts an intense search, lighting a lamp and sweeping the floor. The shepherd's actions show us something else about God's love for us--it is reckless. Jesus is telling us stories today about lost things: a sheep, a coin (and a child) and about someone who searches intensely for them until they are found.

In these parables we hear the implication for us. Neither the shepherd nor the woman gives up the search. They are not casually conducting a brief hunt and then throwing up their hands and turning to something else to do. No wonder Jesus is so persistent and insistent in his welcoming the sinners drawing close to him. The parables show he is just doing what God does all the time.

We might wander away from God in big and small ways. But when we hear these parables we can't help but be amazed at how much God loves us. God never gives up on us, "until" we are found. Nor do we find God standing with folded arms when we finally do return saying, "What kept you so long? It's about time!" Instead, there is rejoicing and a celebration. We might feel unnoticed or insignificant in the world's eyes, but the parables convince us that we are worth a celebration, an embrace and pats on the back from those who came to join the party.

The parables aren't just about how God acts. They are initially. But they then call for a response from us. For example: Perhaps we shouldn't give up on those whom others consider hopeless or useless... Where do we need to reconsider a person or situation we have labeled "hopeless" by adding the possibility of grace to the mixture?... Are there people who experience rejections because of church laws or customs whom the parables suggest to us, "Look again and reconsider your position"?... How exclusive am I? Who is in and who is automatically out of my circle of family and friends?... Is there anyone person or group I need to go out of my way to reach out to?

All of us need to reconsider our attitudes and choices in the light of these parables. It is a lot to expect us to shift our world view or change attitudes we have had since childhood. But these parables are tales of an over-abundance of grace. Hey, anything is possible! God doesn't give up on the most recalcitrant sinner. God won't give up on us either, "until" we see with new eyes and hear with new ears.

## ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

John J. Pilch, The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycles A, B.C. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995.

Helps the preacher know the Mediterranean cultural setting for the Sunday Gospel readings (Years A, B & C). Suggests how the preacher might actualize and inculturate the texts for a modern congregation.

### QUOTABLE

It would have been an unpardonable insult if Jesus had said to this group of oriental men: “Which *woman* of you....? So, he abbreviates and generalizes his question: “Which woman losing a coin...?”

In both stories something of great value is lost: one of a hundred sheep, the other, of ten coins. The sheep is lost in the wilderness; the coin is lost in a home. The sheep must be restored to the community, for it is a communal loss. The family might have forty sheep at most. One hundred sheep clearly belong to more than one family. The coin is easily rejoined to the woman’s jewelry, of which it is a part.

The point of each story is that a diligent search will find the treasured loss and bring enormous joy. Pharisees should rejoice rather than grumble over Jesus’ search for and reconciliation of lost sinners.

---Pilch, pages 136-7).

### JUSTICE NOTES

*They have turned aside from the way, making for themselves a molten calf and worshiping it, sacrificing to it and crying out, “This is your God”... (Exodus 32:7-9)*

*“Christians will want to favor ways of life that decisively break with the frenzy of consumerism, exhausting and joyless. We must find a simple way of living.” (Pope John Paul II)*

**“We live in a culture that worships the marketplace.** Market worship is the most prevalent form of idolatry in our culture today.” (Collins & Wright, The Moral Measure of the Economy)

“Consumer choices and consumer demands are moral and cultural expressions of how we conceive of life. What and how much we consume manifest our conception of who we are and

why we exist. The spiritual and cultural impoverishment that are the natural by-products of consumerism are evident everywhere” (*The Good Life from a Catholic Perspective: The Problem of Consumption*)

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/background/articles/consumption.shtml>

“We’ve become a nation of consumers rather than citizens. In a consumer society, personal worth is determined by what you have, how much you have, and your ability to get more. *Having* replaces *being*. In the U.S. we’re living on an island of affluence surrounded by an ocean of misery.” (Father Bryan Massingale in an interview with US Catholic)

### **Did you know?**

- Each year Americans spend \$12 billion on video rentals, \$33 billion in weight loss. \$22 billion on cosmetic products, \$110 billion on fast food and \$600 billion on new and used cars.
- On average, people in the United States spend 6 hours shopping per week and only 40 minutes playing with their children.
- By the age of 20, the average person in the United States has seen one million commercials.

### **How do we begin to simplify our lives?**

“Even before we take measures such as cutting consumption, carrying less debt, or spending more time with family and friends, *we need to examine what matters most to us*. Periods of silence can lead us closer to that discovery. Even 10 minutes a day can help us learn more about our true selves--what we personally need, what is missing in our lives, and what drives us to fill those holes with things that never can really satisfy.” (Sister Joan Chittister)

Can we find 10 minutes of quiet time with God each day?

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

## **POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES**

*"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.*

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Cerron T. Hooks                   #0561692   (On death row since 2/9/00)
- Terry L. Robinson               #0349019   (4/10/00)
- Eric D. Queen                    #0544664   (4/11/00)

---Central Prison   1300 Western Blvd.   Raleigh, NC   27606