

## **The lost and found**

We've all lost something we needed ... usually at the worst possible time ... and we've dropped everything to stop and search for it ... even if it made us late for work or school ... or church.

Most public buildings and facilities have a "lost and found." It might be a box, a bin, or just a corner where items left behind by customers, guests, students ... and parishioners ... are kept until they are reclaimed. Stores have them. Airports have them. Schools have them. St. Ann has a basket on the counter in the lay sacristy.

While many items go unclaimed ... perhaps unwanted ... many others are returned to their grateful ... and sometimes frantic ... owners.

Likewise, those of us who are parents have probably had that sinking feeling in the pits of our stomachs when we realized that a child has wandered away from us at the mall, at the fair, or maybe at a truck stop somewhere.

Or perhaps we ourselves have had that "lost" feeling or experience when we were children. I can tell you from experience that the sense of relief when a child is found and reunited with us is a feeling that can't be easily described.

Maybe that's why the parables in today's Gospel reading resonate with us so much.

These three stories ... sometimes called "the parables of the lost" ... were intended as a sharp rebuke to the Pharisees ... and even to some of His own followers ... those who could not bring themselves to forgive those who didn't "measure up" to the standards they had set ... at least for others.

The Scribes and the Pharisees looked down on anyone who weren't ... in their own opinions ... up to God's standards.

Their accusation that Jesus not only welcomes sinners but eats with them is an attempt to prove that he is not worthy and that he can't possibly be the long-awaited Jewish messiah ... the anointed one of God.

The woman who searched high and low for the lost coin, the shepherd who left the 99 and went out in search of the one, and, of course, the father who welcomed the prodigal son back into his home all provide examples of the joy we feel when something valuable is lost ... and then is found.

The coin, while probably of little worth, was still a treasure for the woman, more because it was lost than for its actual value. Having been recovered, it was a source of great joy and an occasion for calling in all her friends and neighbors.

I think we can all appreciate the image of that woman frantically searching for her lost coin.

We've all experienced that feeling of panic when we have lost cash or something else we value. We also know what it's like to turn the house upside down until we find it ... and then, hopefully, the moment we do find it ... the relief and pleasure we feel.

And ... Jesus explains ... this is how God feels when He finds us. We become lost and God does whatever it takes to find us ... and feels the same kind of relief and joy that we feel when we have found something we treasure.

Likewise, the shepherd.

It would have been easier ... and perhaps make more sense ... for the shepherd to have let the one sheep go and to stay and protect the 99 who had not strayed.

How did he even know one was missing?

Did they have numbers painted on their sides like the ones featured in that mattress commercial?

The fact is that shepherds always know their own.

Out of a hundred sheep before Him, God, the Good Shepherd, actually notices that one has gone missing.

What if the Church said “Forget about him ... we don’t need him!” when one member strays?

How long would it be before there were more and more strays?

And more and more empty pews?

And then there’s the Prodigal Son.

This story is so well-known to us that it hardly needs repeating. But we do ... because we can associate ourselves with one of the characters in the parable.

Perhaps we have been the ungrateful child who demands his “birthright” and then fritters it away in shameful acts, bringing disgrace to the family.

Or maybe we’ve been the parent who unquestioningly welcomes that child back with open arms?

Or perhaps we’ve been the one who resents the younger brother and the father who seemingly cares more about the returning son than the one who has never strayed, who has never caused scandal?

What Jesus told the Scribes and the Pharisees is that no one is insignificant. No one is so far gone that they can't come back. And no one is beyond the Father's love. No one should remain unclaimed in God's "lost and found."

So ...

Will we share the happiness of the woman who finds the one who is lost?

Will we find joy with the shepherd who triumphantly returns with the missing sheep?

Will we celebrate with the father whose child ... thought to be gone forever ... has come back?

Or will we angrily refuse to enter the father's house because of envy, jealousy or a sense of righteous outrage that God would even care about someone who is clearly not worthy of His love?

Who will we hurt if we refuse?

God? Or ourselves ... ?

**END**

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