

The incident that gave rise to Jesus' parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin (Luke 15:1-10) was the attitude of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They grumbled when they saw tax collectors and sinners being welcomed by Jesus. Jesus didn't approve of the behaviour of tax collectors and sinners, but he demonstrated God's welcome to all people who repent. The religious leaders regarded tax collectors as the least worthy members of society. After all, in Jesus' time, tax collectors were Jews who collected money from fellow Jews to give to the Romans. In the process they lined their own pockets by taking extra for themselves.

These religious leaders were shortsighted though. Jesus told them parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin to correct their lack of vision. The word, "lost," is generally used in two ways. The word may describe someone who sins and is separated from God and people by that sin. The word may also be used to describe someone who is confused by his or her surroundings (geographic, mental, or spiritual) and can't find his or her way home. The Bible uses the term "lost" both ways.

Jesus welcomed tax collectors and other bad people who had broken the commandments of God and the laws of the land. He didn't welcome them because he approved of their behaviour. He welcomed them because he saw what the religious leaders of his day didn't see; their need. Looking down on notorious traitors, cheats, and other wrongdoers is understandable but dangerous. It's understandable because we don't want to promote or approve of people doing wrong deeds and not facing justice for their deeds, but it's dangerous because before God, a self-righteous, judgmental attitude is as bad as the deeds of bad people. The human malady being addressed here is self-righteousness, expressing itself through grumbling (or murmuring in some translations). Looking down on people can really say more about ourselves than about them.

Our national newspapers and broadcasters and "keyboard warriors" on social media have been in recent times increasingly re-discovering the not so new sin of looking down on people who allegedly look down on people. The same self-righteousness that damages the souls of those who consider themselves morally superior people can infect the souls of those who consider themselves the moral and political arbiters of what we now call political correctness. Jesus hits these attitudes of superiority right between the eyes.

It's dangerous for a sheep to wander off because it is vulnerable to being attacked by wolves, or being turned over on its back. A sheep turned over on its back is totally helpless, unable to right itself without help. A little sheep can lose its footing and fall off a mountain to a shelf below and there die from exposure to the elements of nature. That's why the good shepherd leaves the 99 sheep and goes out after one lost sheep. A sheep can be lost as it drifts away from the shepherd and the flock. So can human beings. In the Exodus 32:7-14, we hear about the lost Hebrews in the wilderness. They wandered off from God and from their moral traditions. They were lost in the wilderness, grumbling, murmuring and complaining, forging false ideas into idols.

Like them we are lured away from God by attractive distractions and false gods. Like them we easily get diverted by wrong turns on our journey toward the promised land. Like them, we need to hear and heed the Word of God to get back on the path that leads to eternal life. We need to be found and saved. It is encouraging to hear that God seeks the lost. It is also encouraging to hear that God seeks the least. One sheep seems considerably less important than the 99 that do not wander off, but God thinks otherwise.

God is a seeker. He searches until he finds the lost and the least. That's the point of the parable of the lost sheep. That's also the point of the parable of the lost coin. To a rich, powerful person, one silver coin, a drachma, may have seemed like very little, but to a common labourer, a drachma would be much more important. To the religious leaders who were in the upper class, a drachma might have seemed like it had little worth, but to a common housewife, a lost drachma, was worth a tedious search. You might recall last year I elaborated on the importance of the coin as being a necklace set which would be forever lost. Jesus said, God is more like the common labourer and common housewife than like the rich and powerful class.

In the parable of the lost coin, Jesus was saying that each individual, created in God's image, is worthy of God's attention. God focuses on each of his children because he loves every one of us as if there is only one of us. As the housewife rejoiced in finding her lost coin. In the same way, the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents. God grieves over every lost soul and celebrates when a lost soul returns to him. As God rejoices over each sinner who returns to him, so we should seek out and witness to the lost, rejoicing in their return.

Jesus' concern for the lost and the least is revolutionary. It turns the value system of the world upside down. For love for the least and the lost flies directly in the face of the way many people think. Christianity offers a revolutionary reversal of values. Saint Paul the Apostle, the premier missionary and theologian of all time understood this transvaluation of values in the light of his own sin. In our Epistle for today, Paul said, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would to believe in him for eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

In other words, Paul saw himself as one of the lost and the least because of his sin. In that respect, we are like him. If we don't see our sin as more offensive than the sins of others, we haven't understood our sin at all. The primary comparison is not between you as a sinner and me as a sinner, but between me as a sinner and God as the righteous one. We are called to compare ourselves to God. That eliminates self-righteousness and arrogance. Since God made it his business to find the lost and the least, that's what the Church must do, too. when you think of it the Church is one big lost and found department.

The Pharisees and scribes in our story were spiritually shortsighted. They didn't see that we should look at the need for God in everyone's life. The lost and the least have the same need for God that all of us have. The distressed, displaced, and despised of this world may be better in touch with their need for God than the successful. The down-and-out may be more open to the call to repentance than the up-and-out. In addition, whatever we do — or don't do — for the lost and the least, we are doing — or not doing — for God. For Christianity is all about finding and welcoming the lost and the least.

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