

Lostness

It is probably obvious that the title for today's homily comes from thinking about the passage from Luke which narrates two of the three parables which Luke grouped together which directly address the concept of something lost..lostness. However, in these parables the perspective is from the one who lost something and goes searching for it. Nothing is given about how the items searched for became lost. In fact, it might be up for debate if the sheep knew it was lost. Certainly the coin did not. Dr. Eugene Peterson once described parables as narrative time bombs, which seems to be the case with most if not all of them, because the more you think you know exactly what their message may be, you discover something unexpected in another reading. We want to explain Jesus' parables, usually reading them either as analogies to be decoded or puzzles to be solved. Whichever approach we use, it is with the purpose of pinning them down; taming them so we can reduce them to an equation and reducing the possibility that they may challenge our ways of thinking or doing. With these particular parables it is crucial to remember the setting in which Jesus tells them. Jesus is upsetting the religious authorities by his actions and words. And, while we know that these parables are addressed to the Pharisees and scribes, it is important that we remember that those folks are not the "bad" guys that we often consider them. They are the ones in the society who really care about their faith, who are committed to it and its institutions. Today they would be the pastors, elders, Sunday School teachers, etc. They are those who care and participate in the life of the church. In this instance, what has upset them seems to be not what Jesus has said, but the company he is keeping...those with whom he is sharing table fellowship. He's hanging out with, talking to, and most notoriously sharing meals with sinners. And sharing meals implies a certain familiarity, even intimacy with those gathered together. And these folks Jesus is eating with are the lowest of the low among them: tax collectors, who are turncoat locals working for the Roman Empire thus squeezing their neighbors for the benefit of themselves and Rome. The general classification of sinner here is a name reserved for those whose lifestyle has put them beyond the bounds of moral society. This is not a term used according to our modern understanding that we are all sinners who have fallen short in God's eyes. When Luke uses this term he is talking about someone whose pattern of sinning is so habitual, even second nature, that the whole community knows about it. Just as when Luke describes the righteous he doesn't mean those who are either perfect or self-righteous, but those who are actually and actively trying to live up to the law. Two outstanding things emerge from these parables...not only are we not told how they became lost, but there is no statement of regret or repentance needed for the search to begin; and the common response upon the successful conclusion is only the joy felt by the one who searched, no further mention of the lost item's response to being found. Including the third parable about the son who left home changes the observations which can be made, but Jesus told them all so the first two probably have their own message for us. This seems clear when we place ourselves in the narrative to hear that question Jesus asks his audience: "Which of you" is the opening to these two parables which is used to describe the scenario of the shepherd with the one hundred sheep who leaves them to search for one which is missing. We often fail to note that the sheep left behind are not in a pen but in the wilderness a place where they could also go straying or become the prey of wolves. When put that way, the obvious answer becomes no one is likely

to do that. Considering that second parable might make a little more sense at first glance. After all if you only had ten coins and lost one that would be a significant loss and worth a great deal of effort sweeping and searching to find it. But if you found it, would you really throw a party for all your neighbors to celebrate since the funding of the celebration could easily cost more than the lost coin was worth. Not likely that anyone would want to host a celebration which would be a greater expense than the value of the lost coin. That's the problem with really looking at the parables of Jesus...they need to be carefully considered before rushing to assign meaning before examining the total picture and question Jesus is asking. "Which of you", he asks the Pharisees and scribes would act this way. Looking at these little stories within the total context the behavior of the searcher makes no sense. But these stories don't conclude with the finding of the lost in either case, but with that calling together of community to share in rejoicing when the lost is found. Of course, since we usually view the searcher in each case being God in light of the final verse of these paired parables, we too have cause to rejoice because this is the way God views God's children—God's lost, confused, hurting children. When it comes to God's children, God has no sense according to the ways of the world—our ways of looking at things. God would risk everything to find one of them—one of us! And having found a lost and beloved child—would give everything again to celebrate that finding. There is only one kind of word to describe this type of behavior—desperate. That's right, God is desperate for us, to find us, desperate to redeem us, desperate to draw us back into God's abiding, abundant love. There is a saying about parents and children which seems almost painfully true in the lives of most families: a parent is only as happy as his or her least happy child. Then remember that the image which Jesus describes and uses as the relationship into which he invites us to join is that of parent-child. No wonder then that Jesus says there is more joy in heaven when a single sinner repents than over ninety-nine righteous. It seems that in God's eyes the more lost a person is, the greater the cause for celebration when that one is found. An example from our lives could be there is always joy when someone comes home after a hospitalization because that is good news, but when the person returns home after surviving cancer or a stay in the ICU, that news seems almost unbelievably good. That God has come in Jesus searching for all of God's lost children is wonderful news; God in Jesus also invites those of us who have been found to join in the search for those still lost. Because an aspect of these parables which we often don't consider is that when you are lost, at least according to these parables, there's not much you can do. You need to be found. Here Jesus doesn't set out a formula about repenting first, or give four spiritual rules, or even compose a prayer of petition to be learned. It seems at least from these two examples that Jesus might figure that often the lost don't even know that they are lost in the first place. While Jesus proclaims that repentance is needed, before repentance can take place something else must happen first. Repentance in the biblical sense is more than being sorry. It may include a mending of one's ways and moral reform, but the chief characteristic is a turning around, a change in perspective, a recognition of where we are and where we need to go. It is something to bring us to an understanding of our being lost and a corresponding desire to turn around and be found. So delving deep into these parables a question arises: Can you be righteous and still be lost? Consider that Jesus addressed these parables to those who separated themselves from those they considered sinners; that they sought to follow the rituals and laws of the Torah and considered themselves to be righteous; yet it seems that Jesus thought they too were lost and needed the message

found within these parables. The sheep that wandered away created its own lost state but would not have understood the separation as dangerous. The coin that was lost had taken no action which resulted in its being lost. Repentance is not really an option in the case of the lost sheep or coin. Yet still a search was made and rejoicing occurred when the search was concluded successfully. The parallels here show that the emphasis is on the finding and the one who is committed to finding what is lost—the otherwise hapless lost sheep and the passive lost coin. What occurs in response to the state of lostness describe here bears little relationship to the pragmatic view taken by the world. These parables reveal a divine point of view that reframes why seeking and finding matter. And why we have also been commissioned as bearers of the good news of God's initiative and seeking nature. Joseph Fitzmyer puts it well: "repentance does not take place without the provocation and the initiative of our gracious shepherd" who desires relationship and reconciliation. True repentance involves an accurate assessment of one's own status. That God keeps searching and seeking—even in the darkest places is the good news we have to share. This does not square with the world as we know it to be sure. But to the one who has been sought and found, this truth about God's desire to find and claim is assurance and worthy of great joy. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.