

If there is one thing we should take away from the readings today it is that every single one of us is important in the eyes of God. He will not rest if even one sheep is lost or one coin is missing.

One lost soul is worth all the trouble it takes to bring that soul back to God. It is worth wandering in the wilderness looking for the foolish stray sheep. It is worth lighting a lamp and sweeping the dirt floor to find the lost coin.

And God rejoices when the lost are found.

As the shepherd rejoices on finding his sheep and the woman rejoices on recovering her coin, every sinner who returns to God causes a joyful celebration to break out in the halls of heaven and the heart of the Father.

Our God is a loving, compassionate God, although sometimes we do not see Him that way.

The Pharisees didn't. They saw God as more harsh and judgmental. It was in response to this narrow minded view of God that Jesus related these parables we heard in the Gospel reading.

From the Pharisee's point of view, there was the righteous, themselves, and there were sinners, everyone else. From their point of view God should justly destroy all sinners. But God is not like that and Christ demonstrates that He uses His power and authority to bring sinners back into communion with God.

The Pharisee's view of God is off base. In much the same way we hear people today who say that the stern God of the Old Testament is different from the loving God of the New. Like the Pharisees, this attitude says more about the person that holds this belief, than it does about God.

Thinking of God as a dedicated shepherd, is closer to the Truth. He feels anxious in regards to sinners, not anger. God does not want to condemn us, He wants us back. The Pharisees cannot understand this because they have painted God in their own image. They call for harsh judgement of sinners because it appeals to their pride, it feeds their vanity and makes them feel superior to others.

But the Lord has no vanity, only love. The unlimited and completely selfless desire of God to save sinners was revealed most fully in Christ on the cross. But it is also behind every other episode of salvation history.

Take the story of Moses we heard today. Moses had been on the mountain in prayer, receiving the Law from God's own hands. The Israelites down in the valley had lost hope and abandoned their faith.

God performed miracles to bring them out of slavery in Egypt. He destroyed the Egyptians who were pursuing them and led them day and night to a place of safety. But still, they could not trust in His goodness. As soon as they gave in to doubt they abandoned the God who gave them everything and embraced a pagan idol which had given them

nothing. Like our first parents they gave in to that seductive voice and strayed into the darkness.

From the Pharisee's perspective, God should simply have destroyed them. And indeed, it appears in the reading that that's just what God intends to do until Moses persuades Him otherwise. But there is something else going on here. God does not change, that's what makes Him God. The God of Moses is the same loving compassionate God that goes out of His way to seek the lost sheep.

So why does he threaten Moses' people with destruction? He does this in order to test Moses. Moses has spent weeks in prayer, in God's presence. He has been faithful to God through some very difficult times. And so Moses has come to understand the heart of God, a heart of forgiveness. God threatens to destroy the Israelites to see if Moses has learned this lesson of forgiveness. And Moses passes that test.

The mercy, patience and forgiveness of God is a lesson we all must learn if we are truly to be disciples, if we are truly to be the shepherds God calls us to be.

This is what Saint Paul is trying to tell Timothy in the Second reading. He is telling Timothy that his experience with God has been one of patience and mercy.

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

Paul knows this because he counts himself as a great sinner. But he was chosen by God for a great mission and given an abundance of grace to complete that mission.

We also have been chosen and given an abundance of God's grace so that, like Paul we may reach out to the lost. We are all here to continue the mission of Christ, to save sinners, to find the lost sheep and bring them back. That is the task we have been given by our King and our Lord. We have been abundantly blessed to bring those that are lost in darkness back into the light.

And no, it isn't easy. Many of the people who most need to be found, do not even realize they are lost.

There was a family, mother, father and children who had an annual tradition of going back to Chicago every year at Christmas to visit the grandparents. They would spend their time taking in the sights and visiting museums together. One year they decided to all go to the mall to do some Christmas shopping. In the midst of all the fun and excitement, one of them noticed that little three-and-a-half-year-old Matthew was gone. They were terrified. They imagined Matthew being rushed to a restroom, put in different clothes and given a different hairstyle, and then swiftly smuggled out, never to be seen again. Dad took charge, assigning the rest of the family areas to search. He took the parking lot. The snow had just fallen and he was out there trudging through the snow drifts calling Matthew's name. He felt foolish, but he was even more concerned for the welfare of his son.

He didn't find Matthew and he trudged back to the meeting point. His wife hadn't found him either, nor had Grandma. And then Grandpa appeared, holding little Matthew by the hand. You can imagine the joy and relief they felt. For his part, Matthew was fine. He hadn't been crying. He wasn't traumatized. To him, there had been no problem.

They asked Grandpa where he had found him. "The candy counter," he replied. "You should have seen him. His eyes came just about as high as the candy. He held his little hands behind his back and moved his head back and forth, surveying all the delicious options." Matthew didn't look lost. He didn't know he was lost. He was oblivious to the phenomenal danger he was in.

We live in a candy-counter culture, people are so distracted by all that society has to offer them, that they do not even realize they are lost. They don't look lost, and you may have a hard time convincing them of the fact.

But that does not mean we should give up on them. It is very easy for us to be judgmental, like the Pharisees, and to project that attitude onto our perception of God. But to do so causes great harm to ourselves and to others.

Our selfish attitudes can build a wall around our hearts, keeping us from experiencing God's love. That wall can also come between us and other people. We may become so fixated on the flaws of others that we become blind to the fact that every person is a child of God. And every person is of immense value to Him.

Each of us may be here to save just one person. The entire purpose of our life here on earth may be to bring just one soul back into the light. And that is a tremendous mission, worth whatever trial and trouble and tribulation we may have to endure. Because if we accomplish that task, if we save just one person, the halls of Heaven will ring with joy and we will hear the voice of our king who tells us,

“well done good and faithful servant, come and share the joy of thy Lord.”