

## **TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – (C)**

Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14; Psalm 51; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15: 1-32.

**The parable of the prodigal son that we have just heard must be among the best-known passage in the Bible. Even many people who never read the Bible or for that matter even go to church regularly have heard of it. But is it in fact a parable about just a prodigal son? Or is there perhaps much more going on in this biblical story?**

**To put the younger son at the center of the parable is to already begin to misunderstand its significance. What is really at the center is the father's great attachment and concern for both his sons, his willingness to welcome back the younger and his desire to reassure the older son of his rightful place in the family. Jesus makes the point, in describing the father as He does, that God does not let go of us even though we might let go of God.**

**To begin what kind of person is this younger son? We might view him and his escapades in a flattering, even glamorous way; the young modern hero who wants his independence and autonomy and whose failings seem almost a desirable part of growing up. If we see him in this light then sin can easily start to look like the necessary road to freedom and self-knowledge. You know – the “how can I know something if I haven't tried it?” view on life, that is, however, not the best guide to life.**

**The father's estimate of what happened to this his younger son is far more accurate. He was lost and is now found; he was dead and has now come back to life. This way of looking at the younger son is made clear by the position of the parable in the Gospel – this is the third of the parables offered in today's passage. First we hear of the lost sheep, then that of the lost coin, and finally that of the lost son.**

**All three stress the great joy that comes when what is lost has been found. We have to take in the full force of what is meant for the son to be lost in order to fully appreciate just how much joy the father felt upon his return.**

**In one sense, the loss is much like that of the person who had lost the sheep or the woman who had lost the coin – they certainly rejoice upon finding what was lost, but with the son we are speaking of another human being – for the son to be lost is worse than to lose an animal or a coin, because the father does not celebrate the ending of his own loss of a son as much as the ending of the lost condition of his son.**

**What of the other, the older son? He too is part of the parable and he risks becoming lost in a different way from that of his brother – lost because of his attitude. Elizabeth Jennings opens one of her poems with the haunting lines, “When you are lost/even near home...” The younger son was lost, yes, but because he ran off from home leaving his father and brother as if they meant nothing to him – until he came to his senses. But the older brother stays put, always right there at home but he risks getting lost by distancing himself from his father, cutting himself off from his brother, giving into anger because he feels unappreciated. The older brother risks no longer “being at home”. There are separations that need no great physical gap.**

**What is most powerful here, what we are invited to really take in and embrace is that the father does not give up on either of his sons, wanting both of them to be at home with him and with each other. This is the message Jesus wants us to take in – the father in the parable stands as a symbol of God’s love for us. God’s love for us is a persistent, tenacious, lavish kind of love. As the father in this parable heaps presents on the son who was lost and now found so throughout the Scriptures there are examples of how much love God lavishes on humankind, despite a catalog of infidelities, betrayals and failings on our part.**

**Justice may well give us what we deserve, but love can give us more than we deserve. Let us never forget that: “our God is a God who liberates, a God who saves, a God of mercy, and a God who can and does forgive anyone anything.”**

[From “The Lost Son” a homily by Robert Ombres, O.P. [torch.op.org](http://torch.op.org); “Who is This God to Whom You Pray?” a homily by Rev. Michael Papesh a priest of the Diocese of Pueblo, Co. and my own reflections.]