

# Homily for the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 14-15, 2019

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

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My first reaction to today's Scriptures was that our God is a God of second chances!

We were invited last week to choose to follow Jesus. To embrace costly discipleship. Today, our readings all reveal the costly love of our God. By entering into a love relationship with us, God risks the disappointment and suffering that love entails. God, as it were, freely surrenders God's Self to the unpredictable course of events that is the result of human freedom.

In the Exodus reading, God's anger blazes over the repeated infidelity and idolatry of the Israelites. They have acted perversely, turning aside from the way God commanded. And mistaken human objects for the divine. Yet God remains merciful and forgiving in response to Moses' entreating.

What might be the idols in our own lives? We can recognize them by how they consume our time. Our thoughts and energies.

In his letter to Timothy, St. Paul gives thanks and praise for God's inexplicable mercy and forgiveness. By his arrogance and his violent persecution of the early Christians, Paul considered himself the foremost among sinners. Yet, God has appointed him to be an apostle. An ambassador for Christ. An example of God's love and mercy to all who would come to believe.

Then we have the familiar parables in today's Gospel. Are they so familiar that we don't probe them? God, of course, is the shepherd in the first parable. And God is the woman with the lost coin. Obviously, God suffers none of us to be lost, but searches earnestly for us when we stray. We are God's own. Beloved.

Some say the parable of the prodigal son is more accurately the story of the prodigal father. After all, no self-respecting father in those days would be

keeping vigil. Waiting for a son who had disrespected and dishonored him. Running out to meet him. To say nothing of throwing a huge celebration when he returned. Complete with fancy clothes. And the choicest meal.

Jesus describes a father who wanted only to give his sons everything he had. Clearly, the father is a God image. Always waiting for our return. Ready to celebrate. Perhaps we can imagine ourselves as the son who was lost and now has been found. Maybe we can sometimes understand and appreciate how loved we are.

But there are two lost sons, aren't there? Can we also identify with the older son? On the outside, he is the dutiful son. Doing all that is expected of him. Inside, though, he, too, has wandered away from his father.

Notice how the father also reaches out to him in love. But he isn't ready to accept that love. Listen to the words he uses to attack his father—self-righteous, self-pitying, jealous words. They reveal a complaint from a heart that feels that it never received its due. Expressed in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, such a heart forms the bedrock of human resentment.

Henri Nouwen, a well-known spiritual writer of the last century, wrote that, as an eldest son himself, he could identify with the older son. The need to be good. To be obedient. Faithful. And how that became a burden. Even in his religious vocation. “All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends.” The inner resentment, he says, revealed his own “lostness.” He had stayed home, not wandering off, but not able to live a free life in his father's house. “My anger and envy showed me my own bondage.”

Is it possible that there are many elder sons and daughters among us who are lost while still at home? This “lostness” is characterized by judgment, jealousy, condemnation, anger, and resentment. It can even affect the “saints.” And remain hidden.

Can we hear that resentment—that “lostness”—revealed in remarks about the “undeserving poor?” Do we recognize it in attitudes towards refugees

and immigrants, or even other Christians who aren't following the rules as we understand them? I am beginning to recognize my own "lostness." When I sit in judgment of politicians. Or of the wealthy who seem not to care about social justice.

In today's psalm, we pray for a clean heart. That prayer risks conversion. Transformation.

The God who loved us into being loves us still. Despite our brokenness and failings. God's concern is always for the lost, and that includes us. Truly the God of second chances! God can transform us. If we are willing to ask. And to be open to accept the love on offer.