

Before we explore the two parables found in our gospel lesson today, let me tell you another parable that rabbis tell: God granted three wishes to a fortunate man. He could have anything he wanted, with one condition attached: everything HE wished for, his neighbor would receive two-fold. It seemed like a good deal to the man so after much discussion with his wife, he approached God and asked for 100 head of cattle. God delivered to his land the 100 head, and 200 head of cattle went to his neighbor. Hmm. thought the man. kinda bugged him but not much. He found, of course, that with the extra cattle he needed more land. So with his second wish, he asked for another 100 more acres. God delivered on that promise too, but when the man saw that his neighbor's property increased by 200 acres he could barely stand it. In this jealous haze, he offered his third and final wish to God: he asked that God make him blind in one eye. And it broke God's heart.

You laugh, but this very real human tendency to be offended by God's mercy towards others is the backdrop of this morning's gospel.

Our gospel today says that ALL of the tax collectors and sinners --- the unacceptable people --- were hanging around Jesus. That offended the religious leaders, who were the acceptable people. These stories Jesus tells--- these Lost-and-Found stories that Jesus tells are directed at those "acceptable ones". Jesus, being the master story teller that he is, makes sure everyone in his audience can connect somehow with his message: so his first story is about a man, the second story is about a woman. One story takes place in the fields, the other in the home. Each of these stories is directed at the religious leaders, who wouldn't have thought very highly of either smelly shepherds or women.

In the first parable, the shepherd carelessly risks the safety of the 99 sheep he has in order to save the one he has lost. When that sheep is found, his flock is wholly restored and he makes sure everyone knows and enjoys his good fortune. He throws a party.

Our contemporary sensibilities would advise against that, wouldn't they. Cut your losses, be satisfied with what you have. A 1% loss isn't going to ruin you. But Jesus the story teller knows, in God's economy, every ONE of us is as important as ALL of us. In our eyes, there are important and not so important people. But not in God's eyes.

In the second parable, the stakes are higher: a woman with only ten coins, most likely part of a dowry, is desperate to find the one she's lost. That one coin represents 10% of what she has --- and she is unwilling to let that go. We don't know but her entire future might depend on having all ten coins for a dowery.

After much effort, the coin is found, her treasure is wholly restored and she shares her joy with everyone in the neighborhood. She throws a party.

Immediately after these two parables, and not included in our gospel today, Jesus tells the most well-known lost and found parable all --- that of the prodigal son. This completes the trilogy of the lost. You know that story well --- two sons are set to inherit what their father has accumulated. One son decides – hmmm, if I can get that money now I can have a good old time with it while I’m young. Which is as good as saying, I wish my father were dead so I could have that money now. The other son sticks around to work on his father’s land. Meanwhile, the first son wastes his inheritance, and has completely wrecked his life. He thinks he’d probably be better off being a servant in his father’s house. of course, the father who has no reason to expect to see his son again, never stops anticipating his return. The son makes his way home, and the father, seeing his returning son in the distance drops everything and runs toward him, not knowing how he’ll be received...with open arms, and kisses? With fear and anger? Wrapped in the safety of each other’s arms, past arguments are forgotten. All is forgiven. When the son says he wants to be a servant because he knows he’s not worthy to be his son, the father says Don’t be ridiculous. No, you don’t have to be a servant, the father says, You are mine and now The family unit is wholly restored. Can you see how Jesus escalated the worth of that which is lost in linking these stories together?

I hadn’t noticed that progression before but if you keep these three parables together, you can see it. If we assume that God is the seeker and we are the lost ---- which isn’t necessarily how the stories are meant to be read, btw. But its one way to read these stories. He begins by implying you are worth pursuing and I will track you down like a shepherd who loses 1% of his fold. He moves to the next story – you are worth pursuing and I won’t stop until I find you just like a woman who has lost 10% of her treasure. With the story of the prodigal son he brings the point home – you are worth never giving up on, and I will not forget you like a father who thinks he has lost half - 50% -- of his family. Finding you is that important to me because I value wholeness.

God refuses to give up on us or on his desire for wholeness. He made us to be in relationship with him and He is in the neverending business of pursuit of his children. He is in the business of bringing about wholeness to all of his creatures and his creation. That is what we mean when we pray for reconciliation – bringing the ourselves and the world back into relationship with God.

In the first two parables, there is no judgment of the sheep for having gotten lost, or the coin for misplacing itself, but in the third parable, which is built on the other two, there also is no judgment even where some is deserved in the story of the wayward son. The father brings the son home to a feast ... which really irritates his faithful older brother.

It is easy to understand how that unfairness could offend. It's kinda like this: God's relentless desire for me is unbelievably gracious. God's desire for you borders on offensive.

What really would have offended the acceptable, righteous people to whom Jesus is telling these stories is the fact that God is the seeker in these stories. and God is not like them, grumbling that some get more than they deserve, and that others don't get what they do deserve. God is not like them. God is more like that smelly shepherd who values one stinking sheep as much as the 99. or that poor woman who exhausts herself to find one coin. Instead God's like **them** because of God's willingness to do what it takes to get back his own. What a contrast there is between the grumblers and the unbounded joy that heaven experiences when God's creatures are found.

Blaise Pascal said that there's a God-shaped void in each of us that cannot be filled by anything but God.

These parables of desire and pursuit and wholeness might be telling us that God carries a void which only we can fill: perhaps God has an Isabel shaped void, and a Mike shaped void in his heart, and a Wesley shaped void and he will not rest until we have been found. We are so very precious to God. He spends time in pursuit of us --- like each of us is the only one he is looking for. He has offered the life of his very son in order to make that possible. That's how precious we are to him. That's how precious all of us are to him.

God celebrates us, and every one of his children, when we turn to him to make us whole. Our mission, our assignment is to invite others into that wholeness. Every one of the others. To invite them to the party that God and his angels are throwing because we are all so very cherished.