

Happiness can be predictable, but joy has a way of jumping out at you. Taking a trip might make you happy, but finding your car after you forgot where you parked is a perfectly legitimate reason to dance and shout for joy. That is the level of joy that the characters in Jesus's parables are feeling, because both sheep and coins were very valuable things, and losing just one was a crisis. But he's using those stories not to give advice about inventory management. The real point is suggested by the progression to the third story in this set, which we didn't hear today, the story of the prodigal son. The lost son. The lost soul. Jesus is talking about the joy of reconciliation between human souls and the God who made them.

We often associate reconciliation with fear, but Jesus makes it abundantly clear that God doesn't work the way we do. We tend to think about reconciliation as part of a juridical process of sin, guilt, exposure, judgment, and punishment. We imagine that God uses some sort of version of the human criminal justice system. But that idea is an artifact of our own fear, the culture we live in, and the distance between ourselves and God. Nothing could be further from the truth. God's point of view, also known as reality, is that when we sin, we are lost.

When we use the word "lost," sometimes we mean lost forever. When we talk about the loss of Elizabeth II, or all those lost on September 11, 2001, we are using a euphemism for death, although one that alludes to the grief their deaths provoke. But in his parables, Jesus does not mean lost in the sense of lost forever, but in the sense of wandered off, or fallen between the cushions in the sofa. Lost in the sense of easy to find and bring back, if you know where to look. And, surprise, surprise, God knows exactly where to look.

Of course, to God, there is no such distinction. The dead are not lost to God, but indeed, closer than they were in life, for they have come to God, no longer separated by sin nor deluded into thinking there are limits on God's love, mercy, and grace.

We tend not to think about reconciliation this way in part because we get out of touch with God, and in part because of false messages from our culture, but also in part because we forget another fact. We belong to God. God made us and gave us everything we have. If any resources are under our control, it is only because God has entrusted us with them. So, while God knows perfectly well that our waywardness comes from our sins, our mistakes, shortcomings, and negligence, God also knows that left to our own devices, we would only slip further away. Instead, God searches for us, actively and incessantly, and takes responsibility for bringing us back to God. Not to mete out a punishment, but to commence a celebration. I can't overemphasize that this process is defined by joy, God's joy that God loves to share with us.

God also continues the good works God has begun in each of us, if we are willing to be open to that transformation. God helps us to grow our own capacity for grace, since bigger things are harder to lose. God helps us to grow in our love for God and one another, so that we might be less tempted to wander off, seeking to be loved

by someone else. This feels different from being actively sought by God; the joy is still there, but muted for its normalcy. But we can still get a taste of that full, fresh joy of reconciliation even when we are standing in the center of the flock, or jangling with the other coins, gradually smoothing out each other's rough edges.

The way to get a second helping of this joy is by accepting God's invitation to help find other lost souls and bring them home. St. Paul loved this feeling so much that he made it his life's work to bring as many people into relationship with God as his strength, his skill, and the Roman Empire would permit. One of his most powerful gifts was his own experience of reconciliation with God.

As is typical, Paul hadn't even realized he was lost, even as he was a chief enemy of the Church, killing Christians left and right: he thought everything was hunky dory. Rather than punish him, God embraced Paul, transforming him into a chief apostle of the Good News that God is love and God chooses to love, and to save, all of humanity, all of creation. Paul, in turn, embraced God, accepting the joy, and using the story of his own authentic spiritual experience, his own encounter with God, as a way to connect with different people and get them excited about God's love, and determined to share that love in community with their neighbors.

None of us have gone as far astray as Paul did, so God won't need to use the extreme measures that were necessary to bring him back. But God does have a vocation for each of us. The details are personal to each of us, but the general idea is the same: to use God's gifts to build up God's church. So don't be afraid to follow God's lead in reaching out beyond the boundaries of this community. You can look forward to finding the joy of new, or renewed, relationships with God in the most unexpected places.