

**Mercy Parables**  
**24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**  
**(Lk 15)**

In the three “Mercy Parables” of Luke 15, Jesus teaches both the extent of sin’s harm and the superabundant abundance of God’s mercy.

**Sin causes the sinner to become lost.** The sheep is lost, the coin is lost, the son is lost. Being lost means that the sinner is alienated, cut off. Sin harms – breaks – relationships, first with God, but also with one’s fellow man. The lost sheep is cut off from the rest of the flock, and the prodigal son makes a formal break from his father, family, and homeland. Each parable depicts the condition of mortal sin, a selfish act by which man banishes himself from the face of God and becomes antagonistic to his neighbor (cf. Gn 4:16).

**Sin causes the sinner to suffer.** The sinner ends up in a “foreign” and hostile place, subject to danger and famine, cut off from the grace which is a normal component of covenant love. The lost sheep is vulnerable to wolves, being away from shepherd and flock. The prodigal son in particular, suffers hunger and is abandoned by all his new “friends” as soon as the money runs out. Sin is the pursuit of some selfish gratification, the enjoyment of some lesser and temporary good, which always leaves the sinner emptier and sadder afterward than before.

**Sin causes the sinner to lose his dignity.** Most of all, what Jesus stresses about sin in these parables is how it compromises the dignity of the sinner, obscuring his true worth. The lost coin has fallen to the ground and become covered with dirt, obscuring and hiding the imprinted image, and causing it to lose its luster. And most dramatically, the lost son of a noble and wealthy father ends up not only as a foreign slave, but on the level of the lowest animal, the pig, and in fact beneath the level of pigs, since even they are given food but he isn’t. Like the lost coin, he too is literally groveling in the dirt.

By this dramatic image, Jesus illustrates how sin causes the sinner to forget who he is: clay indeed, but clay infused with the divine spark of God’s breath and imprinted with the divine image. Man is created as a son of God. By sin he compromises this divine dignity (life “*according to the spirit*”), and descends into the clay, living “*according to the flesh*” (cf. Gal 5:16-25, Rm 7:15-8:17).

If sin causes the sinner to be lost, reconciliation causes the sinner to be “found” and restored again to his rightful place. To be found, there must be repentance (turning away from sin), and reconciliation (being restored to grace and returned to the proper relationships). The parables, especially the Prodigal Son, illustrate the nature of repentance: the son “*comes to his senses,*” realizes the folly

of his sin, and resolves to turn back: *“I will rise and go to my father.”* This repentance includes acknowledgement and confession of sin (*“I have sinned against heaven and against you”*), as well as the acceptance of the obligation to do penance (*“treat me as a hired hand”*).

The greater part of reconciliation is not found in the repentant sinner, but in the merciful Father. Indeed, there is nothing the sheep/coin/son can actually do to be restored to the flock/treasury/house. Only the shepherd/woman/father can restore the lost one. The main goal of the parables is to highlight this incredible and superabundant mercy of God. It is precisely to reconcile and restore sinners that Jesus is sent.

**God’s mercy never fails.** God never abandons the sinner, who by his own act has gotten lost. The shepherd leaves behind the 99 in order to search for the lost sheep. The woman sweeps diligently through the night by lamp light, until the coin is found. And the father daily goes out to the highways looking for his son’s return (*“while he was still a long way off, the father caught sight of him...”*). Though we give up on others and even ourselves, Jesus wants us to know that the mercy of God is greater than any sin, and more persistent than any discouragement.

**God’s mercy restores and heals the lost dignity.** The sheep is “lifted up” on the shepherd’s shoulders. The coin is cleaned and polished to reclaim its original luster. The son is clothed in a worthy robe and given sandals and a ring: all symbols of his place and favor in the family.

**God’s mercy is celebrated in heaven.** Finally, the parables culminate by stressing the celebration which takes place each time a sinner repents: *“the angels in heaven rejoice.”* There is almost a sense that all of heaven is oriented to this one goal: the salvation of each man.

Only those who grasp this will go to heaven. After illustrating in a three-fold way the nature of sin and mercy, Jesus responds severely to the self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees who had complained about him eating with sinners. He casts them as the older son, loyal and faithful, hard-working and obedient, outwardly the model son. But inwardly the older son is evil, like Lucifer, suffering from pride. *Separating himself* from the family, he says to the father, *“this son of yours...”* The father in turn reminds him, *“this brother of yours...”* A second time the father has to meet an alienated and cut-off son, outside the house, pleading for him to come in and be reconciled. Despite what the older son may think of himself, there is no doubt according to the parable that he too is in mortal sin.

But unlike the younger son, he lacked the humility to repent. Perhaps because his sin was more spiritual in nature (pride) as opposed to fleshly (dissolute

living), he never experienced the pressing circumstances of desperate hunger that would encourage repentance. His was therefore the much more dangerous and difficult sin to recognize and overcome. In the end, while the younger son was able to enter the heavenly celebration, the older son was excluded and cast out into the outer darkness. This is Jesus' constant warning to the self-righteous: the last will be first, and the first will be last.

St. Therese of the Child Jesus wrote about how even though she could not recall ever having committed a mortal sin in her life, she nevertheless considered herself to be the worst sinner. Whereas God's mercy was manifested in many others through their repentance and reconciliation, in her case it was manifested superabundantly by the way in which He removed the obstacles and occasions that would certainly have caused her to fall into grave sins. She knew herself well enough to recognize how much danger her fleshly instincts posed to her salvation. Though without mortal sin herself, she was no less in need of mercy than the condemned criminals of her apostolate for whom she prayed.

Like the angels in heaven, we must put reconciliation as the top priority in our lives. First of all, we must be constantly repentant ourselves. And secondly, we must continually seek to live in peace with others, especially working to overcome the harm and injury to relationships caused by sin.