

Today's parable of the lost son is the third of three "lost and found" parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and today's lost son. Jesus tells these parables together and they are connected to each other so we are going to take the time to look at each one. The first thing is that Jesus tells the parables in response to the scribes' and pharisees' complaints that he associates with sinners. The implication of their complaints is that those who are lost don't matter. Jesus counters by teaching that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents [one lost person who is found] than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance."

Of these three parables, the one about the coin is shortest and is the easiest to overlook. It almost seems unnecessary when compared to the other two...which is why it might be the most important for us to consider right now. The coin is an inanimate object. It has no idea it is lost. There are many people who have never had an encounter with Jesus or any type of faith and may not even be able to distinguish between right and wrong; they don't know they are lost because they have never experienced anything else. Some might argue that if they are happy that way, they should just be left alone. The problem with that is there is something much more tragic that goes hand in hand with not knowing we are lost. Not only is the coin unaware that it is lost, it is also unaware of its value. It cannot imagine that anyone would care enough to go looking for it. There are a lot of people just like that coin who have no idea that they are loved by God or that they matter to anyone at all. They think their lives are worthless. In many ways, our society reinforces this notion by promoting what Pope Francis has called a disposal culture or a culture of death. A culture of death doesn't just mean the literal taking of life. It means getting rid of, or hiding away, anyone who is inconvenient. We do this through abortion and euthanasia, but also in how we treat the unhoused, how we treat many of those with mental illnesses, how we treat immigrants, how we treat the poor, the sick, and those in prison or recently released from prison. How do we treat our elderly family members? How do we treat our employees and coworkers—do we see them as valued cooperators in God's plan or do we use them as rungs on a ladder to our own personal glory? St Teresa of Calcutta, Mother Teresa, said that the greatest poverty in the United States and other developed countries isn't material poverty but a poverty of love. Many people live like that coin, unaware of their intrinsic value as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. Our first job in that regard is to find them and help them realize that they do matter and that they are loved. And we do this best by introducing them to Jesus.

The lost sheep knows it is lost because its buddies are not anywhere around. It doesn't know where to find them. Maybe it is hurt and can't make its way back to the flock. It is very easy to wander off and get lost in this way. We all know people like this or have been there ourselves. The shepherd knows they are lost, but perhaps he wants us to go out and lead them back home.

The lost son is different from the other two. He knows he is lost. He knows he is valued and loved, but in his case he deliberately separated himself from his father. His father desperately wants him to return and is watching for him, but the son has to realize his error and decide for himself when to come home. It is up to us to form our consciences according to the gospel and the teachings of the church. We have to recognize when we have sinned and we have to decide for ourselves to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit which is always calling us to repentance. The Holy Spirit is always calling to us, but often we choose to ignore it. Right now is the time for us to recognize the error of our ways, take responsibility for our sins and ask God to forgive us.

All three parables have additional characters besides the one who is lost. The most obvious ones are the shepherd, the coin's owner, and the father. All of those characters primarily represent God but remember that God often works through humans. How is God calling each one of us to go in search of those who are lost? How is he calling us to welcome them home? Then there are the background characters such as the guests of the various feasts, the ninety-nine sheep who don't stray, and the older brother of the lost son. That older brother could be a member of the ninety-nine righteous ones who never strayed. He seems to be a good son; the others seem to be faithful—but how do they feel about the stray? Are they compassionate, or are they resentful of the father and shepherd's joy? How about us? Are we resentful or do we rejoice?

Whether we acknowledge it or not we are all sinners. Our older brother, Jesus, has brought us home—or wants to bring us home. There will be rejoicing in heaven when that happens. May we share in that joy...not only for ourselves but for all of those found and rescued by Jesus.