

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Jesus and Irrational Love”

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Sometimes the Church offers us a longer version and shorter version of the Gospel reading, this Sunday is one of those times. The longer version of the Gospel reading has the story of the Prodigal Son, however, we covered this parable last Lent. If you are interested in a homily on the Prodigal Son, you can find it on my website under “Year C”. In contrast to the Gospel reading we had in Lent, this Sunday also has a couple parables leading up to the story of the Prodigal Son that I want to focus on instead since we have the opportunity. I love these parables because they demonstrate clearly that Jesus had a great sense of humor. The humor can be lost on us these days because we live in different times, so let me help you with why these parables are both funny and yet profoundly helpful at the same time.

Jesus is being accused of impropriety by the scribes and Pharisees because he liked visiting the houses of people they called “sinners and tax collectors”. And so, Jesus responds to them, “What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it?” It is a funny quip because the obvious answer is, none of them. No one would risk losing ninety-nine sheep in the desert to find a lost one. In my imagination, I can see Jesus telling this parable with a smile on his face because the story even gets more ridiculous. Jesus continues, “And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep’”. This is even more outlandish because you are now at home with the lost sheep inviting the neighborhood to a celebration while presumably the ninety-nine other sheep of yours are still out there in the desert. The situation Jesus is describing is intentionally ridiculous. The people listening to him would have been amused wondering, where is he going with this? And as funny as the story is, what Jesus is saying leads to an insight about God that is quite profound. Jesus says, answering his critics, “I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.”

Jesus isn’t finished with his critics yet, because he has an even more ridiculous story for them. A woman loses a coin and spends all night sweeping the house trying to find it. When she does, she invites the neighborhood over for a celebration that would have cost a lot more in hospitality than the coin she lost. Again, the situation Jesus is describing is intentionally ridiculous, but again he is making a profound statement about God. Jesus says, “In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

What makes these parables so powerful? Consider the presumptions about God that the scribes and Pharisees were operating from and how Jesus corrects them. The presumption about God the scribes and Pharisees were operating from was one where if you associated with sinners who lived lives contrary to God’s will that God would be displeased with you as well. Jesus corrects them by articulating in an entertaining way how much God loves his people, especially those who stray and that love is an irrational love by our standards. Or perhaps best articulated by St. John’s Gospel, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that those who believe in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” The incarnation itself is God visiting

the households of a whole world full of people in need of repentance. This is what makes Jesus' critique of the scribes and Pharisees all the more entertaining. You don't win souls for God with a finger wag from across the street. You don't win souls for God from a place of arrogance or hubris either. You win souls for God from a starting place of irrational love. Love requires relationship.

This is a helpful message and critique of how we sinners typically operate. How often do we withhold love from others who don't agree with us? The maxim we sinners default to often is, if you don't agree with me I cannot love you. We can see this every day by the way on the cable news channels, don't we? I don't care if it is Fox News, CNN or MSNBC, on cable news it feels like there are programs after programs all day long articulating more reasons why you should hate someone who disagrees with your politics. It's toxic. When a politician the news channel disagrees with does something bad, there is another reason to hate that politician. When a politician the news channel disagrees with actually does something good, it is because they were forced to or pressured somehow, because there is no way in heaven that slime bag would voluntarily do anything good. Have you noticed that? Next time you feel forced to watch cable news, count how many times that happens in the course of an hour. Pick any channel.

It is a sad commentary how many times this sort of thing happens in families as well. When disagreements happen between family members, how often does it end up with people shouting at each other? I mean, literally shouting at each other. It is sad how often disagreements between family members can become reasons to withhold love. It happens in every family. And honestly, when I hear about it in the confessional (all the time, I might add), I find myself scratching my head wondering, "You are arguing with each other over what?" I sometimes wonder if the next time an argument breaks out between family members if a better practice would be to simply respond to the vitriol with the words "I love you" instead? Try that. And when the angry family member protests and says, "You are only saying 'I love you' to me because Fr. Frank said to say 'I love you' in his homily", actually sit down with the family member and explain why you love him or her, make it real. And make it clear that your love for them has nothing to do with whether they agree with you or not on whatever issue that you are arguing about. Make your love for that person in your family irrational. Make your love for others irrational. Only when love is firmly established can disagreements have a shot at being sorted out. Only with love, will we ever offer others a reason to consider our point of view.

I really like our new Archbishop's coat of arms. Every Archbishop has a coat of arms that has a motto that summarizes the emphasis of his ministry. Archbishop Etienne's motto is *Veritas in Caritas*, "Truth in Love". What I think he is trying to emphasize with this motto is: as Catholics we can proclaim the truth with love. Moreover, I think he is also making the point that if we fail to proclaim the truth with love, we are just a resounding gong or a clashing symbol. Like St. Paul says in his First Letter to the Corinthians, "Without love we are nothing". Jesus is telling us the same thing in our Gospel reading today. Who leaves ninety-nine sheep for a lost one? Nobody, except Jesus. Who throws a block party to celebrate finding a lost coin? Nobody, except Jesus. Who allows himself to be handed over and die for sinners? Nobody, except Jesus. Who has the power to save humanity from its self-destructive hate? Nobody, except Jesus. How do we get there? We get there with truth in love and that love is irrational. The love Jesus calls us to is, in fact, divine.

We can ask ourselves this week, what are the arguments I am involved with at home, at work or in my world right now? What are the bitter resentments I am holding on to that just make me grumpier day in and day out. And then ask yourself, how can I respond to these arguments in a truthful way with the irrational love that Jesus calls us to in the Gospel reading this weekend? Now imagine if our other family members agreed to this. Imagine every soul on our planet agreeing to this. How much better life would be?