

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle C) Homily
Saint William, Champion | September 11, 2022
Ex 32:7-11, 13-14 | 1 Tm 1:12-17 | Lk 15:1-32

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Have you ever had the experience of hearing a popular song over and over and over again, so that you were thoroughly and completely tired of it? Or maybe it's a book, or a saying... Maybe it's one of your friend's or even your spouse's favorite sayings... Or maybe it's a mannerism they have, or a piece of clothing that they love to wear, one that they would wear every day if you let them, one you might rather bury somewhere or maybe even burn for good measure...

Familiarity breeds contempt... isn't that what they say? And that can be a challenge for us. Consider that our Sunday readings and Gospel are on a three year cycle. In 2025, on the 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time, we will have these exact same readings again... For many people here today, you've probably heard these stories ten, or twenty, or even thirty times... and consider that Father or Pat has probably heard these readings three times each year! Fortunately, even though we hear them again every third year, we are not the

same person, and that allows them to have new meaning. So it helps to take a different look at things to allow us to see things from a different perspective.

One of the first things I remember learning about when I entered formation for the permanent diaconate was that the point of view with which we look at any subject with definitely colors how we see it... Consider a recent sporting event – perhaps a close football game. I saw a number of tasteful clothing items before last weekend’s game between Notre Dame and Ohio State... for some people, there was relief that they had won, for others, maybe some satisfaction that they had played well, for others, maybe some disappointment that there were some things that needed improvement on before the next game...

About fifteen years ago, I heard a homily for this weekend from a different viewpoint. And there were some pearls of wisdom that changed my views on today’s Gospel. So... Let’s begin with the setting: Jesus is spending his time with a bunch of sinners and tax collectors... Keep in mind that these are people who are KNOWN sinners... and tax collectors... who were infamous for collaborating with the hated Roman government and overcharging the Jewish citizens to make themselves rich. They were detested, maybe I could even say

hated, by lots of people. Especially, the Scribes and Pharisees, whose job it was to maintain and interpret the law... And the Scribes and Pharisees are clearly upset that Jesus is hanging out with these low life people and they say with scorn, hoping that Jesus will hear them: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Our Gospel tells us: "So to them he addressed this parable." And it's not just one parable... it's more like three parables... And Jesus really responds to their scorn and contempt if we look a little deeper.

The first one is the story about the lost sheep. Now sheep are not known as particularly smart animals... as a matter of fact, they're dumb. They're easily led and they need a shepherd, strictly because of that... Jesus is linking the Scribes and Pharisees to sheep! And Jesus speaks of a shepherd who is willing to leave 99 sheep behind to go in search of the lost one...

The second story is about the woman and her lost coin. Some scripture scholars have suggested that these lost coins might have been part of a necklace. But the Scribes and Pharisees held women in low esteem. They were second class citizens in Jewish society... So now Jesus is linking the Scribes and Pharisees to women! And in our story, the woman searches diligently and when she finds that last coin, she has a party!

But the final story is the parable of the prodigal son. And in this story, Jesus gets in some additional jabs at those who are challenging him. First, he has the son ask for his share of the father's estate before the father is dead... Perhaps he is linking the actions of the Scribes and Pharisees to those that would be acceptable at a later time, but really premature and out of place now. Then Jesus mentions wasting the inheritance on a loose life and prostitutes. Is it possible that he is implying that the Scribes and Pharisees are wasting what they've been given? Then he talks about pigs... Of course, Jewish people don't eat pork, as pigs are considered to be unclean. But when Jesus says that the young man longed to eat the pods on which the swine fed, well, I'm sure the Pharisees and Scribes were totally grossed out by this. Pigs were disgusting enough. A former pastor and good friend of mine used to speak about this as eating maggots or bugs. Jesus knew what he was doing and he carefully crafted his parables get an emotional response and to hook the attention of his target audience.

At the same time, Jesus meant for those parables to have meaning for us here today. So what are the things we can take away from these parables?

First, God is ready and willing to pursue us wherever we are. Like the shepherd or the woman, he is willing to search high and low until we are found.

Second, God is not afraid of the messiness of our lives. I think that we all have those times in our lives where we think that we are worthless and unlovable. But God sees value where we often can't. We are his prized possessions, and things would be incomplete without each and every one of us.

Third, God is infinitely generous. Our parable of the prodigal son is not so much about the wayward son as it is about the forgiving father, who never stopped looking for his son, was watching and waiting for his return, and rejoices greatly when he is found.

And finally, God challenges us to be like him... although we may have found ourselves siding with the older son in that last story... God calls us to forgive, to allow for others to grow and change for the better, to give second chances. To put aside the veneer of our own self righteousness and soften our hearts, to see value in our imperfect brothers and sisters, just like he sees value in us.

