

## **Jubilee of Mercy – Parables of Mercy: The Lost Sheep // The Lost Coin**

In Luke 15, Christ responds to the scribes' and Pharisees' complaint that he was eating with sinners with three parables that teach about the nature of God's mercy and the proper response to seeing that mercy shown to others. Pope Francis writes: "In these parables, God is always presented as full of joy, especially when he pardons. In them we find the core of the Gospel and of our faith, because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon." (*Misericordiae Vultus*, #9)

### **The Lost Sheep**

*"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? And when he finds it, he sets it upon 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.' 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." (Lk 15:4-7)*

The lesson is clear that the Pharisees should have been happy to see Jesus extending mercy to sinners, not critical of him for doing so. Their self-righteousness blinds them to the vigor of God's mercy and the outreach of His love.

But some additional lessons may be less obvious. Would a shepherd really leave 99 sheep in the desert – not in a protected area – to look for one stray? There was a *Brother Juniper* cartoon many years ago in which Brother Juniper holds one sheep in his arms and tells the abbot, "While I was looking for this one, the other 99 got away." Some who heard Jesus tell the parable may have thought, "No, I wouldn't endanger the safety of the whole flock for the sake of one stray – it would be too risky. Why would Jesus even suggest this?" That's the point about God's mercy – He abandons no one. Every sinner has value and is worth saving, so He joyfully pardons each one. God's mercy is not ordinary or carefully measured – it's extravagant, outrageous, boundless.

When the shepherd in the parable finds the lost sheep, he sets it on his shoulders. The reason is that this sheep is alone and afraid, and won't respond to the shepherd's voice as it would when part of the flock, but in this situation would just lie down and cower. One might expect the shepherd to be annoyed at having to hoist the animal onto his shoulders to bring it back, but Jesus says he does so "with great joy" – a reflection of the Father's love in bringing a sinner back to the fold.

## The Lost Coin

*“Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it? And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost.’ In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Lk 15:8-10)*

Jesus reinforces the lesson about responding to God’s mercy with a second example of joy over finding a lost object. It is obvious that if the angels of God rejoice over one repentant sinner “in just the same way” that the woman and her neighbors do over finding a lost coin, then the scribes and Pharisees should be happy that Jesus eats with sinners, not carping about him because of it.

Again, a closer look at the parable tells us more about God’s mercy. The coin in the story is a Greek drachma, about equivalent to a dime in American money. This was the translation in the 1960s – a lost dime. But the specific denomination was dropped in later translations, perhaps because it seemed ridiculous that the woman would search so hard for a dime, unless perhaps she was in severe poverty. And it would be even more ridiculous – in fact, downright embarrassing, even for a poor person – to gather friends and neighbors to rejoice over finding a dime. People lose such “small change” all the time and think nothing of it. Many people won’t even stoop to pick up a coin that’s less than a quarter, let alone looking for one. Finding lost change under easy chair cushions is the stuff of punch lines, not triumphs. Better to just call it a coin than specify its worth.

Yet, this gets to the heart of God’s mercy – He does not seek out the sinner because of that person’s relative value, but in spite of it, just like the woman in the parable searches for her dime. What the world may consider to be almost worthless – a single sinner – is worthy of God’s effort to extend mercy and pardon. And He rejoices with His angels over each and every sinner whom He rescues and pardons.

To experience, to witness, such infinite mercy should give each of us great joy. And impel us to share the Good News of God’s mercy with those in need of it.

*“The mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us. He feels responsible; that is, he desires our wellbeing and he wants to see us happy, full of joy, and peaceful. This is the path which the merciful love of Christians must also travel. As the Father loves, so do his children. Just as he is merciful, so we are called to be merciful to each other.” (MV, #9)*