

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2022 C

As you probably know, St. Anthony of Padua is the go-to helper for finding what is lost, an association that goes back to a book of the Psalms with his own notes that he used in preaching. Taken by a novice who left the monastery, Anthony prayed it would be returned – not so much for the book but for the *change of heart in the young thief*. Anthony got his book back – and more important, got an apology from the one who took it, and they became companions in religious life.

I call on St. Anthony often when I lose things: tools, or bolts, or the occasional slip of paper with the phone number I am supposed to call. But we can lose other things as well: our patience, our tempers, our compassion, our desire to pray or to serve. Today we remember the loss of life on September 11, 21 years ago, and all the other losses that have followed in its wake. In those greater losses, I believe St. Anthony also prays for us.

Jesus appeals to that experience of losing things in this family of parables in the remarkable 15th Chapter of Luke. The lesson is simple enough to put into words, but impossible for the human mind to fully grasp: *God's divine mercy is infinite, inexhaustible, never-failing, unending*. We listen to the parables, and Paul's words, and we perhaps wonder: Is the loss of that one sheep, that one coin, that one stubborn and rebellious brother, really worth all the effort? To God, Who *is* Love, the answer is always **Yes**. St. Paul experienced this divine love that changed his life, so overwhelmed at being found by Jesus that even years later he repeats twice with humbled awe: ***"I have been treated with mercy."***

In each parable here, when something is lost, it is not simply written off ... loss prompts a search. The shepherd goes after the lost one; the woman searches the house; the Father keeps vigil to catch a glimpse of his returning son. These parables are not merely stories told BY Jesus; they express the very heart of His self-understanding, His mission from the Father. Not only does God never tire of welcoming us, **He never tires of seeking us**, even if we do not realize we have lost the way.

We can take a double lesson from these parables. First, we might consider those we lose patience with, those we are willing to write off as unimportant or not worth our time and effort. Like the older brother in the parable, these might be family members; or it might be neighbors, strangers, even ourselves at times. Jesus teaches us that there are no children of His Father who are expendable, none for whom He would not, and in fact, HAS not, offered His life. Today, we pray for patience, for compassion, and for a greater share in the timeless and infinite love we see displayed on the Cross, for those we count least, whether they be people far away and strangers to us, or those we see every day.

And second, we might think of how willing we are to search for God and the things important to God in our own lives. Are we willing to settle for a self-defined “good enough” in our spiritual lives, or does our desire for God motivate us to read Scripture, to devote time to sincere prayer, to seek ways to serve others, to take opportunities to help as gifts from the Holy Spirit? ***God desires to be found, and our relationship with the Lord will be as rich as we allow it to be.***

Although it was intended as an accusation and an insult, there is perhaps no greater hope in our lives than the deeper truth present in the Eucharist: Jesus, the Son of God, DOES welcome sinners, and eats with them. This week, look for an opportunity to help at least one person in need, whether friend or stranger, so like St. Paul, they can say: ***“I, too, have been treated with mercy.”***