

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Sunday, September 11, 2016

The Twenty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on one or more of the scripture readings for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

GOD CAUSES REPENTANCE

“Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.” “Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost.” “Let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine ... was lost, and has been found.”

In all three parables that Jesus tells in this Sunday's Gospel (Luke 15:1-32), people end up rejoicing because something lost is found – a sheep, a coin, a son. Then Jesus says, “There will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

We might conclude that it is a sinner's decision to repent that causes heavenly rejoicing. That it is a sinner's decision to turn from sin and back to God that makes the angelic choirs break into song.

But if we carefully look at the three parables in Sunday's Gospel, we see they do not focus primarily on a sinner's act of repentance.

In the parable of the lost sheep, there is no act of repentance. The straying sheep does not realize it broke a rule and disobeyed its shepherd. That sheep does not go through a conscious process of regretting its poor decision and deciding to return to its 99 fellow sheep. In fact we might conclude if anyone broke a rule it was the shepherd. He did not keep both eyes on all the sheep, all the time.

In the parable of the lost coin, the same thing holds true. The coin is an inanimate object incapable of regret and repentance. If the coin could think, it would wonder why the woman dropped it or put it in a place she could not later remember.

Then in the third parable we hear of a self-absorbed, self-centered son who demands his inheritance in advance, leaves home, spends all his money on “a life of dissipation,” and then decides to return.

But there seems to be little repentance on that son's part. If his funds had not run out, or if someone had refilled his wallet, he would have continued to squander his life and his money. It was not regret but starvation and self-concern that set him on the path home.

It is not the straying sheep, the lost coin, or the wayward son that give a reason for rejoicing, but rather the shepherd, the woman, and the father. The shepherd searches out the animal that was lost. The woman finds the coin. The father runs from his house to embrace his returning son and finds him a place in the family once more.

Those parables tell us that repentance and rejoicing happen not because of what we do, but because of what God does for us sinners. As Saint Paul tells us, “But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8).

We are not the ones who find our way back to God. God finds us and touches us with his mercy and love. What we call repentance happens when we have the sense to take the loving, forgiving, merciful hand that God stretches out to us.

The angels of heaven rejoice not because of what we do, but because of what God in his mercy continues to do for us.

© 2016 Rev. Thomas B. Iwanowski