

Twenty-fourth Sunday Ordinary Time

For the last couple of Sundays our Gospel readings have pointed to being humble and getting our priorities straight. We have been asked to humble ourselves, rather than seeking honor and the highest place. We should allow God to raise us up rather than raising ourselves up. We were also asked to love Jesus above every person and above all things in this world. Jesus should be our first priority, our first love. If we do these two things then other things in our life should fall into place.

However, we are human. We are easily distracted. We are easily drawn off course. It is all too easy for us to love and desire the things of this world. It is all too easy for us to love other people more than we love God. When we desire the things of this world a little too much, then they become what we live for. They motivate us. They are what occupy our thoughts and desires. Remember when flat screen TVs became available, and more popular? So many people were rushing out to buy the biggest screen possible for their home. On Black Friday, many people would line up for hours in the middle of the night in order to get a flat screen TV at an unbelievably low price. There were even fights over the TVs. As Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Mt 6:21)

Today we are given the interesting first reading of the golden calf from Exodus (see Exod 32:7-11, 13-14). The Israelites had been led out of slavery in Egypt. They were now in the desert. Moses had gone up the mountain to be with God, and he had been up there for forty days. He had been gone so long that many of the Israelites thought that Moses had died. Their leader, Moses, was gone so they might as well go back to the way that they had lived while in Egypt. It is believed that the Israelites had adopted many of the cultural habits of the Egyptians while in their country. This included worshipping many false gods. God, the true God, was trying to lead them away from this false worship and damaging way of life. However, given the chance the Israelites quickly reverted to former bad habits and were once again worshipping a golden calf.

This is more than a quaint story. A story that we have heard many times and might just brush off. This is actually a story of human nature. The golden calf represents any false idol that humans may worship. So, what might be some of the golden calves in our own time? In our own time the golden calf may represent pornography. Many people desire and are addicted to pornography. This is why pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry. There are many people that are making a fortune by producing this filth. Sports can easily be seen as another golden calf in our society. Many people spend hours in front of the TV watching sports. Many families don't come to Mass on the weekend because their children are involved in sports. Other ways in which the golden calf can be manifested are gambling, alcohol, drugs, shopping, eating too much.

What happens to people when they worship these false idols, these golden calves? Well, this is where Jesus gives us the parables that we heard today, especially the parable of the prodigal son (see Lk 15). Like the lost sheep, or the lost coin, the youngest son was also lost. The youngest son took his inheritance, which could easily be seen as being a beloved child in his father's house (or eternal life), and he wasted it away on the temporary thrills of this world. The youngest son exchanged joys of eternity for the very temporary joys of this world. Once his money ran out, and his so called "friends" left him, the youngest son was left with nothing. That's because, in this world, one is only valuable if you can produce something for others. If not, this world wants to throw you in the refuse pile. If you think this is too cold and dark of a picture of this world, then you have probably never faced poverty and been rejected and despised by people. This is a cold world to those that are poor and helpless.

But Jesus gives us hope. In the same parable the prodigal son realizes his mistake. He knows that he must return to his father, even if it is just to fill his empty stomach. Whatever his motivation, he knows that he must go back to his father. How does the father react? The father is overjoyed at seeing his son return. So, I

would have to think that the father in this story does not represent a human father. Again, am I being pessimistic? How many human fathers would be overjoyed at seeing their dissolute and bankrupt son return for a hand out? I don't think that there would be many human fathers that would be overjoyed at this. No, the father in the parable represents our heavenly Father. This is why this parable should give us such hope. God the Father is overjoyed when one of His sons or daughters repents and turns away from a life of sin. That son, or that daughter, had been lost but was now found. That son, or that daughter, had been dead because of a sinful life, but was now alive again.

This parable is about the great love and mercy that God has for His beloved sons and daughters. He doesn't want to see any of them lost. *However, He knows that many will get lost along the way.* Many will be like the Israelites in the desert that quickly forgot about the true God and started worshipping a false god. God knows that many will take their inheritance, this is the inheritance given to us in baptism when we became God's adopted children, and will waste it on the things of this world. Many will waste their divine inheritance by living a sinful life. God the Father is the merciful Father that is waiting for His children to return to Him. God the Father is the merciful Father that sent His Son Jesus as the Good Shepherd to seek out the lost sheep. Jesus is always trying to bring back the lost sheep. He never gives up looking for and trying to bring them back. And once a lost sheep allows himself or herself to be found, there is great rejoicing in heaven.

So, these readings for the last few weeks do go together. Jesus asks us to be humble and set our priorities straight. Love Jesus above all things. If we keep our eyes and our hearts fixed on Jesus we will not get lost in this world. However, being the weak humans that we are, Jesus knows that many of us will get lost along the way. We will allow some other things or people to distract us and pull us off of the path of life. Some of us will get very lost. But we have hope that the Good Shepherd is always working diligently to bring us back to the fold. Jesus is always doing His best to get our attention again, to throw away those golden calves that are worthless, and to return to the One that can offer us salvation, eternal life and happiness. And there will be great rejoicing in heaven – for those that were lost have been found. Those that were dead to sin, have been given new life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.