

Sunday's Word

The joy of return and restoration

September 15, 2013

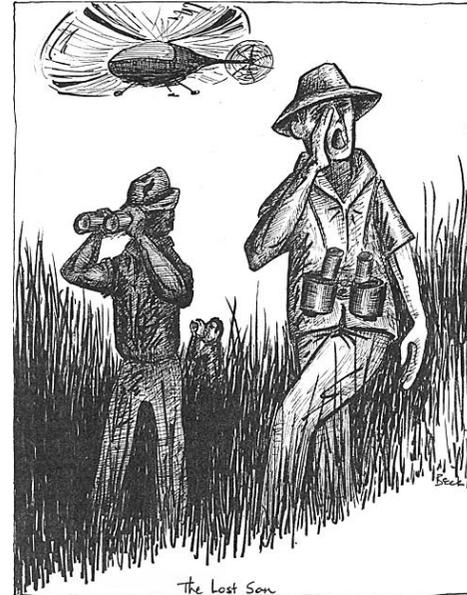
**TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME****Ex 32:7-11, 13-14**
The Golden (molten) Calf**Ps 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19**
In your great compassion...**1 Tm 1:12-17**
Paul's change of heart and direction**Lk 15:1-32**
Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Prodigal (Lost) Son
(or)**Lk 15:1-10**
Only the Lost Sheep and Coin
[http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/
091513.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/091513.cfm)**REV. ROBERT
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Exodus recounts an exchange between God and Moses, with one statement from each. First God speaks. Then Moses speaks.

God tells Moses to go down from the mountain to his people because they have just fashioned a golden calf to worship, in lieu of not hearing from Moses. But then The Lord decides to destroy his people and supply Moses with another and better. In his response, Moses reminds God of the promise he made to make Israel a great nation. In a verse missing from the reading, Moses adds a note of motivation: observing this, the Egyptians will conclude that God is a vicious being, who lures people out into the wilderness in order to obliterate them. At this, God relents.

The story of the Prodigal Son belongs to a set of "lost" stories in this chapter — a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. (The drawing attempts to evoke the trauma of losing a child.) But the story of the Prodigal differs from the other two. In addition to being much longer, it is a double story.



It gives much of its attention to the stay-at-home.

Notice how the stories of the two brothers have similar endings, with the father explaining to each why a celebration is in order: the lost has been found. This parallel hints that we should compare the two. As if we needed any encouragement to do so.

The parable has been applied in as many ways as there are readers. But we might take a cue from the Gospel itself. Luke frequently contrasts those of self-achieved righteousness through works of merit, with those who simply repent. Remember the tax-collector and the Phar-

isee in the temple (Luke 18:9-14). And similarly, Simon the Pharisee and the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears (Luke 7:36-49).

Today's parable seems to fit right in with this. The two sons illustrate the two options. The younger son repents and experiences mercy. The older son insists on merit based on his own efforts. Theologically, what is missing here is grace, and the need for it.

The lost sheep and coin are very similar parables, speaking to the experiences of men and women of that day. They reflect the first part of the Prodigal Son story, before we get to the second son. In each case, the emphasis is on the rejoicing that results from recovering the lost, as compared with the lack of rejoicing from never having been lost and found. It is a common experience that we fail to realize how we value something until we lose it. And yet, for the items or persons that are never lost, the value is still there, but we do not have a chance to realize it.

The celebration of the fatted calf represents the joy of return and restoration. In contrast, the celebration involving the golden calf signals idolatry, that is, departure. At another level we have a contrast of false worship with authentic worship.

For reflection: Anything that the two sons (or the two calves, for that matter) remind you of?

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