

I have shared while ago the greatest thing I have ever lost, but found again, was the luggage that contained the livelihood of my mother. When she moved to California, I went to Oakland airport to pick her up. By then, it was almost midnight. We loaded the car with her stuff, and drove to her new apartment. There we discovered that the very luggage that contained the cash was nowhere to be found. We each thought the other had put it in the car.

We drove back to the very spot in the airport parking lot, and there it was. Back then the parking lot was not well lit, and the traffic was very low. It would not have any chance of being found, if it happened today. My mom added embarrassment to my burden of guilt by jumping up and down and shouting, "Halleluia!" with outstretched arms. I was just glad that there was no one else around.

Jesus used the parables earlier in the chapter that dealt with lost objects: the lost sheep and lost

coin. The images of a sheep and a coin do not impress our senses, but back in those times, a sheep, or a silver coin, would have commanded a respectable value among the working class citizens. I did a quick internet search, and a pure bred Shetland ewe lamb in the northeast would start at about \$250. A silver coin of that time would have been a drachma, and a half drachma would have been equivalent to a day's worth of wage for a skilled worker.

Given that worth, the joy of finding the lost sheep or a coin, or a luggage containing one's livelihood, would have been great. Everyone in Jesus' audience would have understood what it was like to find those lost items. Jesus told these parables, because the Pharisees and the scribes complained that he welcomed sinners and ate with them. It was their way of keeping themselves ritually clean, by not associating with those people who were categorized as sinners. One might say that they practiced the ritual segregation.

Then Jesus went on to tell his audience of a father whose younger son got himself into a deep trouble. If a sheep, or a silver coin, were that valuable, how much more would a troublemaker be worth? Jesus' story forced the audience to imagine how they would treat him, if they had a son like that.

About 20 years ago, I called my father and suggested that he get a life insurance. I attended one of the workshops that the annual conference offered, and the subject was about retirement. It touched upon life insurance, and its benefit to the surviving spouse. I was thinking about my mom, in case something happens to her husband. I was surprised by the reaction from my father: he erupted in rage, and shouted to my ear, "Are you saying that you father should die, soon?"

I was completely blindsided by his reaction, and was almost speechless. I remember being so disheartened that time. He took it the worst possible way!

So, when the second son asked his father to give him the inheritance, what did it sound like to his father? At worst, it would have sounded like, "Why aren't you dead, already?" To the villagers, it would have sounded as if the second son was a wayward wretch. It must have been a great disgrace to the family name.

In the olden days, the first born son received twice as much as any other heir. So, we know as much as one-third of the property was given to the second son, who, promptly converted it in cash, and went off to Las Vegas.

Things seemed quiet, until the prodigal decided to return home. When the first born son heard that his father threw a party on behalf of the brother who returned, he became furious: he refused to go in. His words show the resentment that simmered in the first born all these days:

'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat

so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

The first born now had the personal ax to grind, because the fatted calf that had been set aside for his wedding, was killed for his loser brother. One might call it the proverbial last straw.

By any human ethical and moral standard, the prodigal had no ground to stand on. To the first born, especially, who had stood to inherit everything, who had "slaved" for his father, it must have been galling, just to see his brother again—the brother who did not help with the house work, but made off with the 1/3 of his father's fortune; the brother who sullied the family name; the brother who is now the center of all the attention and joy.

It was necessary for Jesus to construct his parable this way, because Jesus wanted to show to everyone what an insufferable and unredeemable wretch the

second son was. Everyone in his audience would have understood the full meaning of what the second son did to his father and to his family.

Everyone would have shaken his head, and said indignantly: "What a worthless wretch!" Everyone would have taken the side of the first born. One might even have felt like saying, "If I ever meet that wretch on the road, I would slap him on the cheek, 'cus that's what a decent person would do." Then Jesus told the audience a totally unexpected response from the father:

" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

Would God do that for a sinner like him? The audience would have cheered, if the father had kicked the wretch out the door. The God of Jesus, however, is nothing like the god that people imagined in their minds. To God

of Jesus, a sinner is like the lost son. God actively awaits for the son to return. God the Father would await even for such a wretch to return home, even after having suffered thus. The God of Jesus was the true portrait of God the Father.

The god whom the Pharisees and the scribes imagined in their minds was the projection of their own values, characters, and desires. Their god told them to love their friends and hate their enemies (Mt. 5:43); but the God of Jesus taught to love one's enemies. They believed that their god condemned sinners; but Jesus understood God the Father, and declared to them: for the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (Lk. 19:10). That was why Jesus associated with sinners.

What is it like to lose your child? What is it like to have your daughter kidnapped? Can you imagine what the parents have gone through all these years, not knowing what happened to their child? How will she look now?

How tall would she be now?
How beautiful will she be now?
Each day, the parents oscillate between sanity and insanity, thinking about their lost kid. They may seek a closure after all these years, for it would mean the end of the daily torture. But they also know: that closure would devastate them, if it ever came. Then imagine that, one day, the child suddenly appeared before them.

If we can imagine the parents' hearts, then we can also understand God's heart: God wants God's lost child to be found; God wants God's wretched child to return home. God is like the father in the parable:

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

May you be found today in the embrace of the compassionate God.