

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14

Psalms 51: 3-4, 12-13, 17, 19

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15: 1-10

Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.

The Garaventa Center

The University of Portland

I'm afraid I'd never make the grade as a shepherd, because I'm sure that if I was out in the wilderness with a hundred sheep, and one of them was foolish enough to wander off, I would wish the wanderer good luck, and keep an eye on the other ninety-nine. It seems like the only reasonable thing to do. It's like triage – or a case for cost-benefit analysis. If I abandoned the herd in order to find the sheep that was lost, I might eventually return with the stray triumphantly draped over my shoulders, only to find that, in my absence, wolves, or sheep rustlers, or insomniacs had made off with the other ninety-nine.

Yes, I would stay with the herd. But our Gospel makes it plain that however reasonable this tactic seems, it's a flagrant violation of the Sheep Herders' Code. Any shepherd worthy of his or her crook and staff would forsake the ninety-nine in favor of the one that was lost.

Of course, the point is that God acts as a good shepherd toward us, when we wander from the 'straight and narrow.' What accounts for God's preferential option for the lost? Why is God so enthusiastic about those who apparently aren't so enthusiastic about God?

I've tried to imagine circumstances under which I'd be likely to leave the herd to search for a single stray. I might do so if each sheep had cost me so much that I couldn't stand the thought of losing even one. This might apply to God. We know what each of us cost Christ.

Our Gospel concludes with another, similar, story: A woman has ten silver pieces. She loses one of them, and turns her house upside down in a frantic search for it. She finally finds the missing coin, and invites her neighbors to join her in celebrating her good fortune. Jesus assures us that “there will be the same kind of joy before the angels of God over one repentant sinner.”

Again, I’ve tried to imagine under what circumstances I might react with such desperate energy to the loss of just one of ten coins. Here’s a possibility: I might search with special urgency if the coins were a matched set, so that the nine remaining coins were relatively worthless without the tenth. Creation is a kind of matched set. It is perfect only when complete. Jesus Christ lived and died to save the whole lot of us, so the return to Christ of even one of us is a legitimate cause for great rejoicing.

In any case, God’s special concern for the lost is another manifestation of God’s boundless, fathomless, prodigal love for each one of us. And it is very good news for Christians like us, who can at times resemble sheep afflicted with wanderlust, or coins lost under the sofa cushions of the Kingdom of God.