

It's Party Time!

Psalm 51 is King David's psalm, prayed with tears pouring down his face, crushed to his knees after Nathan confronts him about his affair with Bathsheba.

It is the psalm of the Jewish people who traded in the living God for a golden calf, which causes God to become ferociously angry, because his dream for us is freedom, and we seem addicted to making idols of money and security and fame.

It is Paul's psalm as he recalls the happy warrior he once was, as he joyfully killed the followers of Jesus, until Christ put him on his backside, blinding him for three long days, so that Paul might finally come to see that it's love, not the law, that saves.

It is my psalm too, as I reflect on my own life of failed relationships, disappointed expectations and loss.

Perhaps for some of you – it is your psalm too.

“Have mercy on me Lord, according to your loving kindness....”

This really is the first step in the life of faith.

It begins by facing up to our own failures, and our profound need for mercy, which, lo and behold, opens the door to a new kind of life.

It's peeking into the door of that new life that today's gospel takes us.

Here is Jesus, partying with tax collectors and prostitutes and who knows who else, while the respectable crowd stands by and tsk tsk's the whole scene.

Don't get the wrong idea, Jesus knows full well that his table mates are indeed folks who are alienated from God, people who have fallen short of the mark, people who might stab you in the back if given half the chance.

Yet what separates them from the tsk tskers is that they know who and what they are....which is actually the first step in any journey of spiritual development.

Just like the first step in AA is to acknowledge that one has lost control over alcohol, just so, the first step toward the kingdom is to acknowledge that we are the lost, the confused, the bewildered.

The show begins with the Pharisees who are upset with Jesus for having burgers and fries with the riffraff.

Because, for the Pharisees, and for many Christians today, religion is all about what people need to do to please God, and hanging out with folks at the bottom of the social ladder is not high on that list.

Religion, way back when and still today, hands out rules and regulations, creates insiders and outsiders, defines the saved and the damned....

And Jesus says: "Look, you've got it completely wrong!"

The lamb is lost.

The coin is lost.

And while I may be tempted to see myself as the searching shepherd or the searching housewife, or at least among the 99 sheep that remain or the 9 coins in the purse; Jesus says, "YOU are the lost lamb, you are the missing coin!"

Just listen to what the Holy Spirit, through St. Paul, says about our human condition:

"There are none who are righteous, no not one." "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Or, when Jesus says to the Pharisees, 'If you were blind, you wouldn't have sin, but because you say, 'we see,' your sin remains.'"

God is the shepherd; God is the housewife, and if you're wondering about the 99 who "need no repentance," I repeat:

"There are none who are righteous, no not one."

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

'If you were blind, you wouldn't have sin, but because you say, 'we see,' your sin remains.'"

So I ask you, fellow sheep — fellow coins, what do lost sheep and lost coins DO, because that is the \$64,000 question that religion asks:

"What am I doing to earn (and thus deserve!) my salvation?"

Are the lamb and coin doing good works, deserving to be found?

Are the lamb and the coin hollering for help?

No!

Lost sheep are as good as dead because left alone, they are dinner for the next lion or tiger who wanders by, so they hide, quietly...

Lost coins are inanimate objects, they just lay there.

All of the effort comes from the one who's doing the searching, the one who's doing the finding, and that one is God.

And that, my friends, is why the Christian faith is not a religion, because according to Jesus, it's not we who seek God -- it's God, always and everywhere, seeking us.

Religion says: "you're in charge of your own salvation!"

Jesus brings us to the lap of God who foolishly, lavishly, and mercifully, loves us.

'OH SURE!" you're thinking, "then what about repentance?"

"We need to repent to get right with God, right?"

Well, sort of...

But the repentance Jesus calls us to is not so much about cleaning up our act; it's about metanoia -- Greek for "entering into the larger mind."

To enter into the larger mind is how we slowly come to grasp the true nature of God's relationship with us -- and our relationship with each other.

Jesus doesn't start a new religion.

Jesus puts an end to religion by putting an end to sacrifices and personal merit and just desserts — by trading all of that in -- for life -- for an abundant life; now, by taking the plunge and participating in the life God is pouring out into our very midst.

It's there in Paul's almost giddy letter written to young Timothy.

Paul is amazed to be judged as faithful even though just the other day he's on the warpath against the followers of Jesus.

Paul is amazed that God shows him mercy despite his history as a missionary of murder.

And what Paul is telling young Timmy, he's telling the most jaded or damaged or angry or hopeless man or woman here:

"If God can have mercy on me, God will have mercy on you. If God can find me, God will certainly find you."

So, if salvation doesn't depend on me earning brownie points with God, then why am I cooling my jets here every Sunday?

Why pledge my hard earned money?

Why help others if God has it all in the bag anyway?

Why indeed?

Because if it's all about mercy, and not about merit, we can begin to let go of the tit for tat relationships that we most of us live in every single day.

We can exhale, relax, and get in the party mood, because it's a party that God and the angels have been throwing since before time began!

If we receive mercy for free, then isn't it the most natural thing to give mercy for free?

If our salvation is unearned by our own efforts, can we give an unearned embrace (or food or money or a shoulder to cry on) to those standing next to us?

And there is this.

When the 1 out of 100, the 1 out of 10, is found, what was incomplete is now whole — the missing piece is back.

Our love affair with difference and division is now healed, and maybe even those Pharisees will join in the party, as a community is united once again.

Isn't that the point of the incarnation, of God becoming a human being?

Through that unimaginable happening, heaven and earth are joined, and a simple meal of bread and wine becomes the very Body and Blood of Christ.

The law given to Israel became a system of rewards and punishment.

Religion, as practiced by too many Christians today, does the same thing.

The law makes lawyers out of everyone; looking for loopholes, trying to squeak by with the least effort, always measuring who is just and who isn't.

It doesn't work.

The law turns people into lawyers.

Grace turns people into lovers.

And everyone knows that lovers are way more fun at parties than lawyers; and it's a party, a feast, that God is preparing for all of humanity.

So, the word from the Lord this morning seems to be:

"Relax baby!"

"Lighten up!"

"..... for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom!" Lk. 12:32.

+amen