

## It's A Party Silly!

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's the psalm of the Jewish people who traded in the living God for a golden calf.

God responds with ferocious anger, because his dream for us is freedom, and we seem addicted to making idols of money and security and fame.

It's Paul's psalm as he recalls the happy warrior he once was, joyfully killing the followers of Jesus.

Until Christ puts him on his backside.

Blinding him for three long days.

Until Paul finally comes to see that it's love, not the law, that saves.

Psalm 51 is my psalm too.

As I reflect on my own life of failed relationships.

Disappointed expectations.

Devastating loss.

Perhaps for some of you – it's 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.

To our profound need for mercy.

Which, lo and behold, opens the door to a new kind of life.

Offering a glimpse of the new life that today's gospel puts before us.

Here's Jesus, partying with tax collectors and prostitutes (and who knows who else?), while the respectable crowd is totally scandalized by the whole scene!

Don't get the wrong idea!

Jesus knows full well that his table mates are alienated from God.

They're people who've fallen short of the mark.

People who might stab you in the back if given half the chance.

Yet what separates them from the Dudley Dorights 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 no control over alcohol, just so, the first step toward God's upside down kingdom is to acknowledge that:

I am the lost!

I am the confused!

I am the bewildered!

The Pharisees are upset with Jesus for eating saimin with the riffraff.

Because, for the Pharisees, and for many Christians today, religion is all about people pleasing God.

And hanging out with folks who live on the wrong side of the tracks isn't high on that list.

Religion, way back when and still today, is about rules and regulations.

Creating insiders and outsiders.

Defining 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 to every one of us,

“YOU are the lost lamb!

“YOU are the missing coin!”

Isn't that what the Holy Spirit is saying through Paul about our human condition?

“There are none who are righteous, no, not even one.”

“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Or, as 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," once again:

"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?

Isn't that the \$64,000 question that religion asks?

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

But what are the lamb and coin doing to be found?

Nothing!

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

So they hide, quietly.

Lost coins are inanimate objects!

They just lie there!

All of the effort, all the searching, all the finding, comes from one place, and one place alone.

It comes from God.

Which is why Christianity is not a religion.

Because, it's not we who seek God -- it's God, always and everywhere, who is seeking us.

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

Jesus says: "A'int true."

Jesus brings us to the lap of the 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 isn't about cleaning up our act.

It's about metanoia -- which you know from many sermons on this point, is Greek for "entering into the larger mind."

Which 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 sacrifice.

And personal merit.

And just desserts.

By trading all of that in -- for the life that really is life!

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 says to young Timmy, he says to the most jaded or damaged or angry person here:

“If God can have mercy on me, God will certainly 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 help others if God has it all in the bag anyway?

Why indeed?

Perhaps 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.

Relationships stinking of obligation and exchange and duty.

We see it whenever someone gives an unexpected gift... as we rush to the store to repay them!

But if we receive mercy for free, isn't the most natural response 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 in need?

And there is this.

When the 1 out of 100, the 1 out of 10, is found, what was once incomplete — is now complete.

The missing piece?

Restored.

Our love affair with division?

It's healed.

Who knows, maybe even those Pharisees will join in the party, as a community is united once more!

Isn't that the point of the incarnation?

Of God becoming a human being?

Through that unimaginable happening, heaven and earth are joined together.

A simple meal of bread and wine becomes the very Body and Blood of the Cosmic Christ.

The law given to Israel sadly degenerated into a system of rewards and punishments.

Our American version of Christianity, sadly, does the same thing.

The law makes lawyers out of everyone.

Looking for loopholes.

Trying to squeak by with the least effort.

Always sizing up 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 to be with than lawyers!

Why does it matter?

Because, when all is said and done, God's party is for everyone!

No one is lost!

What's Jesus saying this morning?

"Relax!"

"Take a breath!"

“..... for it’s your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom!” Lk.  
12:32.

+amen