

I'm going to tell you a Sufi Story. The Sufis are Muslim Mystics who have a close relationship with God. Their stories are sort of like the stories of the Rabbis, or the stories of the desert fathers and mothers of our Christian faith; simple, clear stories that take some thinking or quiet reflection to understand. So, here is one.

A Sufi Master is sitting by a river where there is a tree bowing low over the river. There had been a fierce rainstorm but the sky was clearing now. One of the low hanging branches of the tree keeps dipping in and out of the water. And the river is rising because of all the rain. The Sufi master sees that a scorpion is trapped out on the far edge of the branch, and as the water rises he will surely drown. So the master reaches out his hand to take the scorpion to shore. The scorpion stings and the man withdraws his hand. He tries again, and he is stung again. And he tries again, and he is stung again. And he tries again and he is stung again. By this point a passerby sees this strange scene and comes up to the edge of the river.

"Master, don't you know that the scorpion will always sting? Why do you bother trying?"  
The master replies, "Just because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting doesn't mean I should abandon my nature which is to save."

Like I said, this story is simple and clear, yet leaves us a bit puzzled. We get that it is the master's nature to save. It is God's nature to save. But why would anyone keep sticking their hand out to be stung again and again.

The two stories in the Gospel reading this morning are puzzling too. We might not think so much about the puzzling nature of them because we have heard them so many times that we assume the stories make sense, but they really don't.

First of all, in the beginning of the passage, we hear that Jesus is speaking to two groups; the scribes and Pharisees and also the sinners and the tax collectors. We're sort of conditioned to believe that the Scribes and Pharisees are hypocrites. They're the bad guys who Jesus always bests in a war of words. But they really aren't evil. These are guys who just follow the rules set out in the Torah. They are doing what they believe God has called them to do, to defend the faith. They have learned through experience how to use the rules to live well and to get ahead in society. Frankly, they are a lot like you and me. Don't we do the same? We have earned our place in society by playing by the rules and doing what is generally considered "right." When we see someone who is not following standard conventions of behavior we are irked. The Scribes and Pharisees see that Jesus is not playing by the rules and they react as we would.

So, with that in mind, Jesus tells the people assembled some parables. The first the story is about a lost sheep. The traditional way to hear that story is to think, Well, the 99 sheep are the righteous like us, but God goes after the one who is outside, who is lost. The righteous ones, we, can take care of ourselves because we are OK.

But then when you read the story more closely it seems quite odd. "Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them does not leave the ninety nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" Well, no one really! Why would you. In the wilderness where all sorts of harm can come to a flock of sheep left alone, who would be dumb enough to leave the flock with no protection to go look for a lost one. That would have been covered in *Shepherding 101*.

Then to add to the puzzlement, the shepherd never even goes back to the 99 he just goes home and has a party. Here's what it is really about. The 99 sheep are a set up. You aren't supposed to identify with the 99. If you do, then you are found, but Jesus looks at each of us

as we are....LOST. You and I are that Lost Sheep. All those who hear the story, the tax collectors, sinners, Scribes and Pharisees are all lost sheep. I don't know if some of them there would consider themselves lost!

The Second parable is of the lost coin. Each coin would have been a denarius. The value of a denarius in that day was about a day's wages. So in today's money imagine what that would be to you. For discussion purposes let's call it \$100. The woman has ten day's wages and loses one. She is intent on finding it. She lights a lamp, she sweeps, and searches carefully. Here's the puzzling part. When she finds it she calls her friends and neighbors and has a party? A hundred bucks is a hundred bucks, but I don't think I would call all my friends and then go out and spend \$100 for a party because I'm happy to have found \$100. I doesn't make sense. But the story is told for a different reason. This story is about God. The woman is God. And she is overjoyed to have found the lost coin. Jesus is saying that inside the mind of God is a passion to find the lost.

It is the nature of God to be thrilled to find the lost sheep, or the lost coin, or the lost person. What God does when he finds a lost person is he celebrates.

Now, the parable that we do not hear today is the parable of the Prodigal Son. We heard that story earlier this year in Lent. It follows along right after these two we heard today in Chapter 15. It's unfortunate that we don't hear them all together, because taken all together we get a better picture of what Jesus is trying to say. They all build to the climactic cliff-hanger.

The story of the Prodigal is very familiar to most of you. Two sons, the younger one demands his inheritance, and then goes out and spends it wastefully, and ends up eating pig slop. He finally comes to himself and realizes that he rather be his father's slave than live like he is, so he goes home. The father receives him with open arms.

But that's only the first part of the story. Remember there's that older son who's been working hard all this time; following the rules. The father put his robe on the Prodigal, and gave him his ring, and has killed the fatted calf that the older son had been feeding all this time. It's not fair. He had been following the rules and expected a reward for his work. The father reminds the faithful son that he could have a party any time. "All I have is yours," the father says. In other words, "It's my nature to welcome the lost, and have a party." Then the story ends. We're left wondering what will happen to the older brother. Will he realize he needs be lost in order to be found, or will he just continue to be angry and jealous?

Jesus uses these stories to tell the listeners about the nature of God. But, also about the nature of God's beloved people. We see the culmination of that in the parable of the Prodigal Son. For most of us, our nature is to think that we are doing just fine like the older son who was following the rules and thought he was just fine. He wasn't lost.

To be lost is to recognize one's own brokenness and sinfulness. We say the confession of sin every Sunday, to admit to God that we are lost. Do we believe it in our hearts?

The time holy to the Muslim people for remembering one's shortcomings is Ramadan. That season has recently ended. The holy time for the Jews to remember one's shortcomings is Rosh Hashanah, and we are now within what is called the Days of Awe. What better time for us to consider honestly our shortcomings and our nature. With our brothers and sisters all descended Spiritually from Abraham, we have common ground.

We all wish to be closer like the mystics to our God.

There is only one thing we all need to do to be found by God; and that is to be lost.