

When Pope Francis announced the Year of Mercy, which we will continue to celebrate until the beginning of Advent --- he said, “we want to live this Jubilee year in light of the Lord’s words: *be merciful like the Father.*”

Earlier in St. Luke’s Gospel, Jesus spoke this very command to his followers – after telling them they must not just love those who love them – but to do good to all, even those who persecute them, Jesus says: “Be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful.” (6:36)

Throughout his Gospel, St. Luke develops this concept and challenges all would-be disciples to enter through the narrow gate – by putting mercy & compassion into practice.

This theme of mercy is reflected in each of our readings for today.

In the first reading from Exodus, we are taken back to the time when the people of Israel were traveling in the desert. They had just received their freedom from slavery in Egypt and now are on their way to the promised land.

Already -- they get distracted – not the first time, not the last time --- they abandon God – and begin to worship a calf made of gold.

But as grave as their sin is --- God's mercy for the Israelites was far greater: God forgives them and reconciles with them – because it is God's very nature to do so.

As Pope Francis writes in his encyclical on mercy:
“The mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which God reveals his love as of that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a ‘visceral’ love – it gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence, and mercy.”

This same mercy and gutsy love is extended to each of us sinners, offering us hope because God's grace and mercy are greater than any sin, even the sin of turning one's back on God.

St. Paul understands that he also has been touched by God's love and mercy – as he recounts his conversion experience to St. Timothy in the 2nd reading.

Once a persecutor of the followers of Jesus, Paul insists that his turning around, his metanoia, or radical change of mind and heart and lifestyle – was totally due to God's grace and mercy.

Paul's story invites each of us to reflect on our own story, our own lives --- so as to discern the hand and the heart of God gently guiding us – so we, too, can be grateful for God's mercy.

Today's Gospel is found only in Luke's account of Jesus' life. The three stories of lost things: a sheep, a coin, and some sons --- builds to an emotional climax. With each lost-and-found experience, this parable intensifies – drawing us in -- until we are led to realize that we are the lost sheep, we are the lost coin, we are the lost son -----

and the loving and merciful shepherd, woman, and father – is eagerly searching for us --- and greatly rejoices when we are found.

We all lose things, and we know the sense of joy and relief that comes with finding them – although I am still looking for a pair of lost glasses. . .

However, it is one thing to lose a coin or even a sheep – and quite another to lose a son or a daughter.

And interspersed throughout the parable are references to rejoicing and to the fact that all in heaven celebrate when sinners who were lost are found – when those who were dead in sin – have come to life again through God’s loving mercy.

Initially, the reactions of the shepherd and the woman who lost a coin may seem over-the-top: who spends more money throwing a party for their friends and neighbors than the amount that was probably found?

But the reactions of the shepherd, the woman, and the father – are intended to assure us that God is so crazy in love with each one of us – that God rejoicing can hardly be contained -- over finding us who once were lost.

The older brother in the parable, in his resistance to his father's joy and in his resentment regarding his prodigal brother's reinstatement to the family ---

may have evoked certain sympathy from the scribes and Pharisees who were in the crowd. Their argument, after all, was a reasonable one -- Why should an errant son who demanded his birthright and then squandered it on loose living – be welcomed back into the fold??

WHY? Because our God, who is crazy in love with us, is extravagantly merciful --- because our God is irrationally forgiving. Can we accept this type of God? Or will we refuse such a love and find ourselves on the outside looking in while forgiven sinners revel in God's mercy? The choice is ours.