

The Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14
<i>Response</i>	I will rise and go to my father.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Timothy 1:12-17
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 15:1-32

The 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C brings us to what might be the most famous chapter in the Gospel of Luke, in so far as it contains the most famous parable in the Gospel of Luke: The Parable of the Prodigal Son. Now the Church gives us this parable on a number of occasions more than once in Year C, and that's ok because it's a great parable. It is one of my favorites (for sure) of Jesus' teaching. However, in this case, instead of giving it to us in isolation, it gives it to us in the broader context in which it actually originally occurs in the Gospel of Luke itself, as part of a triad of parables: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin and then the (so-called) Prodigal Son. So we're going to look at that entire reading today. It's a long one, but I'm going to work through it. I'll read all three parables and then I will back up and try to unpack them. For the sake of helping focus our attention though, just as we're reading, what I want you to pay attention to is the golden thread that runs through the three parables for today of the theme of lost and found. Keep your eye or keep your ears on those words because that's what unites these three in the context of the gospel. Then we'll back up and unpack them and then see how they go together in what Jesus is trying to say.

In Luke 15: 1-32, we read these words:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness,

and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”¹

Alright. Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, fantastic parables. So let’s walk through these together and try to unpack them. The first point I want to make here is the setting of these three parables. The setting of the three parables is that Jesus is responding to a criticism of the Pharisees and the scribes who are murmuring about him because he receives sinners and eats with them. Now I’ve said this before but it’s important to say it again, when you see the word sinners in the gospel, don’t think of it in a way that we think of it. So for example, when Pope Francis was first elected pope, he was asked the question, “who is or Jorge Bergoglio? Who is Pope Francis?” And he said, “I am a sinner.” So what the pope was saying when he expressed those words is an act of humility, to recognize that “Hey, I am the pope, but I am a sinner like everyone else.” So all human beings are sinners. We are all born into a state of sin under the power of original sin and we all are inclined to commit sin. So we are sinners. That’s what the common expression, the common meaning of the expression in English today means. It means the fact that we fail, we miss the mark, we fail to love God as perfectly as we should, we fail to love our neighbor.

But that’s not what the word “sinners” means in the gospel. In the gospels, when you hear them talk about sinners, it’s a technical expression. It refers to people who were violating the Law of Moses, who were violating the Torah, and they were doing it in a public way and in a grave way. So people whose sins were both public

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

and grave. So the best example of this I can think of is King Herod and his wife Herodias. So Herod is in a public and permanent state of adultery because he's married his brother's wife and the law forbid that kind of marriage and you have one of the commandments, the sixth commandment, that says, "you shall not commit adultery". The same thing with a prostitute or a harlot, if they were known publicly for being a harlot, they would be referred to as a sinner. A tax collector was someone who was known not just for colluding with the Roman government, but they were also known for thievery; they were known for extortion. That would break the commandment, "you shall not steal." So whenever you hear tax collectors and sinners grouped together in the gospel, it's talking about people who were widely known to be living in a kind of flagrant violation of the law, especially of the Ten Commandments. So Jesus is obviously receiving sinners, so he's welcoming these people and he's even eating with them. In Luke's gospel, think back here to chapter 7. When the sinful woman comes into the house of the Pharisee and anoints Jesus' feet, he receives her, he doesn't reject her, and he doesn't tell her to get away, right? He's open to her. And that's scandalizing some of the Pharisees and the scribes because they were known for their fidelity to the Jewish law. They were known for keeping the law as strictly as possible. So it looks like Jesus is being lax about the law. He's being lax about sin, right?

And to this day the same kind of scandal can happen if the pope or if a bishop or some public religious figure welcomes state politicians. You know, sits down and has a banquet with a prime minister, or a president, or some leader who's known to have done evil things or who may be rumored to have extorted, or be in violation of certain laws against human rights. "How could this pope or bishop dine with this person? Is it a condonement of that public sin?" So that's the same kind of scandal that Jesus appears to be causing with his interaction with sinners and tax collectors. And so the religious leaders of the day are concerned about that, the scandal that he's giving. And in response to that, he gives these three parables: the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable...although we call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, that's the famous name for it, in context with Luke, I actually think the better name is the Parable of the Lost Son. As we'll see, that's how the father refers to his son. He was lost and is found. And as part of this triad of parables, that'd be a better name because that's the theme that's running through all three. So let's walk through them.

Before we look at each parable, just a real quick reminder. Whenever we want to interpret the parables of Jesus, remember they are not just nice stories from farm

life about the kingdom of God, they actually tend to be shocking and they tend to be surprising and, as I've told my students over and over again, if you want to get the heart of the parable, there are two keys: the *nimshal*, which is the statement at the end of the parable, which will usually tell you the point or the upshot, but then also (here's no Hebrew word for this), the twist. There's usually some twist, there's some surprising element in the parable. And in a long parable you can actually have multiple twists. You can have more than one. So as we work through it, let's look at what's the twist? What's the *nimshal*? And then how do the three parables go together with the theme of lost and found.

Let's look at the lost sheep. So he says, "what man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one doesn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he's found it?" So pause there. Immediately, we already run into the first twist, the first surprising element, and it's this: No shepherd in his right mind is going to leave ninety-nine sheep behind to go look for one sheep. Notice, he doesn't say he puts them in a fold, right, that would make sense. He says he leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness. He leaves in the desert. Well that's precisely where sheep tend to get lost or are exposed to wolves or exposed to thieves, they don't have any natural form of protection. That's why the shepherd is with them in the wild. He goes into the wilderness with them to protect them. Like Psalm 23, "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me..." He leads me through the wilderness. He leads me to still waters so that the sheep will drink the water. The shepherd is the protector. "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me" because they protect me from threats. They guide me, but they also protect me. So the shepherd is the sole source of protection for his flock. Well if he's in the desert, no shepherd in his right mind is going to leave ninety-nine sheep behind to go look for one sheep. What he would do is put them in a fold and then go look for the one sheep. But this shepherd is kind of crazy. He's not very responsible. So immediately Jesus would have the attention of his 1st Century Jewish audience when he says "What man of you if he's lost one sheep, wouldn't leave the ninety-nine and go look for that one?" And the answer to the question is, well none of us would do that because we are not stupid. So this shepherd seems to be a little off his rocker. He doesn't seem to be quite all there. So Jesus says he goes, he finds that one sheep, he puts on his shoulders and he brings it home rejoicing. And when he gets home, he calls his friends and neighbors together and he says, "Rejoice with me, for I found my sheep that was lost."

The second twist. If you know anything about farming or agriculture, you know that animals in fields get lost all the time. So I grew up in South Louisiana, there's lots of cow pastures around here. One of my cousins, when I was growing up, lived near lots of cow pastures. We would play at the house and cows would break out all the time, they would get lost, especially if a sow was about to calf, a lot of times they'll want to go look for a safe hiding place (maybe in the woods), someplace they can bed down and have the baby. And so what you would end up having to do, the farmer will have to...it's evening, they're rounding up the cattle, we have to go look for this sow and we have to go find this lost cow and bring her back. Well I can tell you right now that any farmer that goes find a cow and bring her back to the fold is not going to go home and call all of his neighbors, "Hey everybody, you know Sue got out tonight, we found her, we brought her home, let's have a party." That's an overreaction to what would be a pretty ordinary occurrence. And that's just with cattle. Sheep would be even more inclined to wonder off. So having a sheep go astray is a pretty common element of the life of a shepherd. It would not be the cause for this kind of exuberation, to have a banquet.

So the second aspect of the parable that's surprising is well "which one of you wouldn't call his friends and neighbors to say come to my house and rejoice? I found my sheep which is lost." The answer is none of us would do that, because this happens all the time. So now that he has their attention, what's the point? "Just so I tell you, there is more joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance." Ah! Now we've got the *nimshal*, now we've got the upshot, the point. This isn't really about (you know) best practices in shepherding, this parable is about God, represented by the shepherd (that would be a normal representation for a Jewish audience, to think of the Lord as a shepherd) and the sheep, represented by Israel. This is a standard thing in the Old Testament; Israel gets compared to a flock. And then the one sheep that goes astray represents a sinner, somebody who's life has lead them astray, somebody who's life has become a life of disobedience to the law; who is lost, not physically, but spiritually through sin; whether its adultery, like the sinners, or theft, like the tax collectors. They are the lost sheep. And so what Jesus is doing is saying, "just like God goes out and seeks for the lost, I'm not going to wait around. I'm going to go and seek out the tax collectors and the sinners", because there is going to be more joy in Heaven over them than over righteous people who don't need any acts of repentance.

But then again you might think, “Well wait, doesn’t everybody need to repent?” Well yeah sure, but there are grades of sin in the new covenant and in the old. Certain sins you could deal with just by going to the Temple, offering your sacrifices, but other sins, like adultery and others, would cut community, would break communion with the Temple and with other members of the community. So they were grave violations of law. So that’s the first parable.

What about the second parable? He says here:

What woman, having ten silver coins, if she lost one, doesn’t light a lamp, sweep the house, and search diligently until she finds it?

Now in this case, the search is not as surprising. I don’t think there’s necessarily a twist here. If you look at the Greek word for coin that Jesus uses, it’s a *drachma*. It’s about a day’s wage. So it’s not an exorbitant amount of money, but it’s not an inconsequential amount of money. So think about whatever you make, you go into work, maybe you work an 8 hour shift, maybe you work a 10 hour shift. If you got a check every day for your shift, you got paid by the day, and you went home and after a day’s worth of work, you lost the check, you’d look for it too, right? That’s a reasonable response. So a *drachma* was not a huge amount of money, but it wasn’t an inconsequential amount of money. It’s about a day’s wage. So she loses the coin and she searches her house and sweeps it and looks until she finds it. The twist comes in the response though. Once she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors:

“Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.”

Ok. Yeah, probably not. Jesus says which woman among you would not do this? The answer is, well, I don’t think anybody would do that. I mean think about it yourself. If you lost \$20 or whatever, you missed placed that bill or even the check that I mentioned earlier and it got shoved down the couch and you searched everywhere and you finally find it. “Oh, I’ve got my \$20 bill.” Do you start calling your friends up and saying “Hey everybody, I lost my \$20 bill but I found it. I want everybody to come to the house, we’re going to have a party.” Now if it’s a day’s wage, it would probably cost you that much just to feed your friends and neighbors. It would probably cost you more than that. It would probably cost you a week’s worth of wages to feed all your friends and neighbors in a banquet if you’re going to invite them to your house and have a celebration. So once again, we have

a seemingly disproportionate response to the finding of the coin. That's the twist end to the parable.

So what's the *nimshal*, what's the upshot? Well Jesus says, "Just so I tell you, there's joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." So once again in this parable (note this, this might surprise you), the woman represents God. And this is something (although in the Old Testament, the God of Israel is always referred to using masculine pronouns; it's always "he" whenever He is described). There are occasions when imagery of a woman will be used to describe God. In the book of Isaiah, it's can a mother forget her child? So also the Lord will not forget his people? So the image of a mother's love is used as an analogy to describe how much the Lord loves and cares for his people. So here we have an image of this woman who is seeking after the coin and the coin represents a sinner. So she represents God, the coin represents a sinner, and then her friends and neighbors represent the angels who rejoice when that one sinner who was lost repents of their sin and comes back into communion with God.

So notice the second element there of a theme. What's the theme running through these three parables? Repentance, repentance. That is so crucial because it's not just divine mercy, it's not just the love of God. In both cases, the sheep and the coin, the sinner repents of what they have done. And the Greek word, by the way, for repentance, *metanoeo*, literally means "to change your mind". *Metanoía* is the noun, "repentance". It means to have a change of mind. *Noeo* is the way I think about something. So the difference between a sinner and a person who's repented has to do with the way they think about what they're doing in their lives, or they think about who they are in the eyes of God. So a real radical act of repentance isn't just regret for doing something wrong, it's changing the way you think and therefore changing the way you live and changing the way you act.

And nowhere is that clearer than in the third and final parable in this triad: it's the parable of the Lost Son. It's a very famous parable. I just want to highlight a couple of things. First, the younger son, notice he goes off to a far country where he's feeding swine. Again, to Jesus' 1st Century Jewish audience, this would have been a clear image of exile because there are no pig farmers, well at least no Jewish pig framers in the Holy land. You might have some gentiles who are living there like the Romans. But there are no Jewish swine herds, so when the son goes off to a far country where there are pigs, those are both images of a gentile territory. So in a sense, the younger son embodies "going away from the land". But in this case, it's

interesting, he's not cast out of the land like the Babylonian exile or the Assyrian exile. He chooses to leave. It's like a self-imposed exile amongst the swine. And notice here that what happens is he changes his mind. Literally, if you go down to...once the famine hits and he realizes that he's starving, in verse 17 it says:

But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you."

So notice here both an awareness to his sin and a willingness to confess it (that's humility), but also notice, "I've sinned against Heaven and you," so recognition that his sin is first and foremost against God, but also against his neighbor (in this case, against his father). So when he goes to his father he says, "I'm no longer worthy to be treated as your son, treat me as a slave or as a servant." And it says he rose and came to his father, but while he was yet at a distance (so he's not home yet), his father saw him and had a compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him. Literally in the Greek here, it says his father threw himself on his son's neck. So here we have the motion of the father going after his son. So just like the shepherd sought out the sheep and the woman searched for the coin, so the father doesn't wait for the son to make it all the way home. He pursues the son himself. He runs to him, has compassion on him, throws himself on his neck and kisses him. And of course the son here enters into his (kind of) prepared speech, "Father, I've sinned against Heaven and before you, I'm not worthy to be called your son." But the father doesn't even really respond. He just turns to his servants and says, "Bring the best robe. Put it on him. Put a ring on his hand, shoes on his feet. Kill the calf, let us eat and make merry and have a festival." And here I think is where one of the twists in this parable is.

Actually, there are two twists: first, that the father runs to embrace the son and second, that he doesn't even reprimand the son. He doesn't say, "I told you so." You know, "You shouldn't have done this." It would have been just for him to express anger. "How could you do this to me?" Even if Mary and Joseph, when they find Jesus, what do they say? "My son, why have you done this to us?" But here the father, in the parable, he doesn't reprimand the son at all, he doesn't say anything. He simply turns to the servants and says let's rejoice. I think this would be extremely surprising for the 1st Century Jewish audience of this parable. Especially if in their minds, the imagery here of a father getting a robe and a ring for his son would be

echoes of Joseph, the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. If you think about in the Old Testament, Joseph gets to wear the coat of many colors precisely because he's Jacob's favorite son. And he's the first born of Jacob's wife, Rachel (although he is number 11 in line, he's kind of the first born of Jacob's spouse that he loved, his beloved wife Rachel), and therefore he's first born in the eyes of Jacob. That's the kind of thing you do with your favorite son, not with the son who scorned you, left the family, took your money, went off to gentile territory in a self-imposed exile and spent it on harlots and prostitutes. That's not how you respond to that son, but that's how the father in the parable responds to the son, the prodigal son, the lost son, the dead son. So his son is not just in exile, he's spiritually dead, but now he's alive again. He was lost and now he's found. And there's your golden thread running through.

Just a quick point about the elder son. It's kind of an epilogue to this parable, where the elder son comes out and he's upset and we all know the story; but what's interesting here (again) is the father's response. What the elder son says here is right. His son did squander his inheritance. He did go out and devour the father's living. The father doesn't deny that he hasn't given him a kid to rejoice with his friends. He doesn't deny any of this, but what the father says that's so surprising is, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." So what's going on here? I think you'll notice, the father says that twice, the same expression, "[he] was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." So however we interpret the final stage of the parable with the elder son, at the very least, I think for me, what's happening here is the *nimshal* of this parable, the upshot of this parable, is actually said twice, but it's not on the lips of Jesus this time, it's on the lips of the father in the parable. What's the point of the parable? The point of the parable is that this son who had lived his life of sin, who had engaged in the self-imposed exile, was spiritually dead. He was spiritually lost, but since he has repented, everything else falls to the wayside. All of that falls to the wayside because now he's been found and he's alive again, and the proper response to when a person who has sinned gravely, even if it's against you, even if it's against me, even if it's against his own father or against his own brother, if that person who has sinned gravely, who has made a wreck of their life, if they come to their senses and they repent of that way of life, the proper response to that is joy, compassion and rejoicing. That's seeing the spiritual reality through the eyes of Jesus. That's how he sees these sinners.

And so the *nimshal* at the end of the parable is meant to help the Pharisees and the scribes at the beginning see these tax collectors and these sinners not as reprobates who are hopeless, but as (in a sense) potential brothers in the kingdom of God, as future penitents who need somebody to seek them and to reach out to them so that they too can have a change of mind and a change of heart and be brought back into the kingdom of God. So it's really a parable about the grace of God and about the mercy of God, but also a parable for all of us as to how do we look at people who are in a public state of grave sin? People who are clearly not living their lives in accordance with the Ten Commandments, according to the love of God? Jesus' response is the way we treat those people is that we receive them and we eat with them in the hope of their repentance and their salvation.

Ok with that in mind, let's go back to the Book of Exodus 32. Once you have those themes in mind, the reading for today from the Old Testament becomes pretty clear, because it's really about people who have sinned gravely and who need somebody to intercede on behalf of them for the mercy of God to be shown toward them. And this is the famous story of Moses and the golden calf. In Exodus 32: 7-11, you remember the story. The Israelites get out to Mount Sinai, God gives them the Ten Commandments, the first commandment is not to commit idolatry and within like 3 chapters they are making a golden calf and they are worshipping it as if it were the god that lead them out of Egypt. And as you might imagine, the Lord's not too happy about this. So in Exodus 32: 7 it says:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation."

But Moses besought the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?"

And then it skips down to verse 13:

Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou didst swear by thine own self, and didst say to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever.’” And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people.

Alright, a lot going on here. First, basically, the reason this reading is chosen is because it’s a story of God showing mercy toward a sinful people. That’s the basic reason. So just as Jesus is calling for compassion and mercy toward the penitent sinner in the three parables of lost and found, so Exodus 32 describes Moses asking God (or imploring God) to have mercy upon Israel, who has committed a very grave public sin by worshipping the golden calf. That’s the basic theme. Now what about that last verse though? “The Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people.” Two things, first, this is going to raise questions: “Well, wait a second. How can God repent?” In other words — especially think of repentance as regretting something that you did wrong — how can God repent and how can God do evil? Because God is all good; he is all loving. Why would the scripture say this? Well if you look at *The New American Bible*, it actually has a softer translation. It’s a little easier. It says “the Lord relented in the punishment he had threatened to inflict.” Now normally in this kind of situation I would try to avoid those translations that soften the text. But in this case that’s actually a really excellent translation of the meaning of the Hebrew words, because in this case both Hebrew expressions, the word “repent”, which is *nacham*, and the word “evil”, which is the Hebrew word *ra*, are polyvalent words in Hebrew. They have multiple meanings and the meanings have to be determined by the context.

Let’s just start with “repent”. The word repent, *nacham*, it can mean to repent of having done something wrong. Just like we use it in English, because it literally means “to change one’s mind.” But it can also mean to relent or have compassion. So one of the effects of changing your mind is if you were angry with someone or if you were going to punish someone but then you decide not to punish them, you can use the word *nacham* to describe that as a way of having compassion on them, or relenting. And that’s what God’s doing here, he is relenting of the punishment that he has threatened to give to the Israelites as a result of their active idolatry. So it’s not him repenting of something that he was going to do that was wrong, it’s him relenting of something that he was going to do that was just.

Now of course, speaking from God's perspective in terms of eternity, God never changes his mind, his will is one, it's unified; he has one eternal will. He grasps all moments of time from the beginning of time all the way to the end in their immediacy, that's what we mean by his omniscience. And so God knows all things. So God knows he's not going to punish the Israelites, but in time, in history, he threatens to punish them to Moses precisely to prompt Moses to act on their behalf through an act of intercession and mercy. And this gets into the whole big theological question of God's divine foreknowledge and our free will and that's too big for us to get into now. Just for now, realize that Saint Thomas Aquinas and others, like Saint Augustine, have always recognized that scripture uses human language to describe how God interacts with us in ways that we can understand. And in that case, it's using a human way of describing God as relenting in the punishment that he was going to give the people. Well what about evil though? Can God do evil? Well no, God cannot perform moral evil because he is perfectly good, but the Hebrew word here for evil can also just mean "bad stuff". For example, there's no Hebrew word for "suffering". They don't have a word for suffering. If you want to describe suffering in Hebrew, guess what you call it? *Ra*. You call it evil. And so, for example, in the book of Job, it describes the *Ra*, the evil that had come upon Job. But the book of Job is very clear that Job has done nothing wrong. What is the evil that has come upon him? Well it's his suffering that he's experiencing. It's the *ra*. So when it says that God relented of the *ra* (the evil that he was going to inflict upon the Israelites), it means the punishment or the suffering that he was going to give them; he relents of that.

That's kind of a long explanation. You might think, "that's way more than what I wanted to know Dr. Pitre, too much information." But I think it's important for us to interpret these things in light of the whole Bible and the living tradition so that we are not scandalized or lead astray by what the text actually means. In any case, that's the basic meaning of the Old Testament text and you can see here that the psalm for today, Psalm 51, is the most famous penitential psalm in the Old Testament. It begins with David — there's actually a preface to this psalm — it says:

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

So in 2nd Samuel 11, the famous story of David committing adultery with Bathsheba and then murdering her husband, or having him killed on the front lines, effectively murdering him, what has David done? He's broken two of the command-

ments in a very public way, or grave way I should say. Adultery and murder are both grave violations of the law. So what does David do? He's become a sinner. So what does he give us? A prayer of repentance:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love;
according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

So this is the famous psalm of David's repentance. Sometimes students will say, "you know, Dr. Pitre, how could David have been a man after God's own heart when he committed adultery and he committed murder?" And I think it was Newman, Cardinal Newman, who said this (I might be wrong about that. I should have checked it before I made the video, but here we are), I think it was Newman who said something to the fact, "I would sin like David sinned, If I could repent like David repented." So yes, David committed very grave sins. but in the wake of those sins, he gives us the greatest psalm of repentance ever written by a human hand. And it's become the preeminent psalm of repentance for the Church. So if you have done things that are wrong in your life and you don't know how to express your repentance, pray psalm 51 with your heart, with your whole heart and your whole mind. It is a beautiful and powerful prayer of repentance that the Church frequently gives to us, not just in the lectionary but also in the liturgy of the hours, so that we are always having a spirit of penitence and repentance from sin.

Alright, so those are the readings for today. In closing, I'd just like to end with two quotes from the Catechism. Again, if you want to interpret the gospels with the mind of the church, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a great place to do that. And Luke 15, the readings for today, is quoted in Catechism, paragraph 545, and this is what it says:

Jesus invites sinners to the table of the kingdom: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." He invites them to *that conversion without which one cannot enter the kingdom*, but shows them in word and deed his Father's boundless mercy for them and the vast "joy in heaven over one sinner who repents" [Luke 15:7]. (CCC 545)

Notice three things about that saying from the Catechism.

First, Jesus came to the world to call sinners. Sometimes people say “Oh you people in church, you go to church, you’re a bunch of hypocrites.” No, no, no. The church is for sinners. Like that’s what they are there for. So I’m going to church, I’m saying “I’m a sinner. I need salvation by my very presence in church.” It’s not an act of pride. It should be an act of humility.

Second, and this is important. He invites them to conversion without which they cannot enter the kingdom. So the kingdom isn’t like a giant eschatological freebie. It’s not a free pass into (you know) an eternal Disneyland. It requires conversion. It requires repentance. If you don’t repent, the Catechism says, you cannot enter the kingdom. So repentance is an essential condition for entering into the kingdom.

Third, at the same time, the father in Heaven is a father of mercy. Yes he’s just, but he’s also merciful, and that’s what the three parables of today are all about. They’re meant to tell us that the father in Heaven is like the father in the parable. He has compassion on his wayward children. He has compassion on those who come to their senses and repent of their sins. And the great thing about this too (one last paragraph from the Catechism, paragraph 2567), I love this about these parables, is that it reveals to us that yes, we have to make an act of repentance. Yes, we have to turn to God, but the reality is that it is God who seeks us first. Just like in the parable, the shepherd goes out to the sheep, the woman goes after the coin, the father runs toward his son. The same thing’s true about God. If we turn back to God after a life of sin, if we turn back to God after committing a sin, we only actually do that because he was already pursuing us first. We only do that because his grace is already acting in us. In other words, long before we turn back to God, he is already searching for us. And a beautiful paragraph from the Catechism, one of my favorite paragraphs, 2567 says this:

God calls man first. Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer.

That’s what these parables are all about. God is tirelessly seeking you. He’s tirelessly seeking me. He’s tirelessly seeking the prostitutes, and the tax collectors, and the sinners, and the politicians, and the tyrants, and the dictators, and the murderers and the human traffickers. He’s tirelessly seeking after everyone so that he can bring them back into the fold, bring them back into his home like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, so that there can be that joy in Heaven over one sinner

who repents, one person who was dead and is alive again, who was lost and now is found.