

Uphold me, O Lord, that I might uplift thee;  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.  
Remember that little bit of Dickens - from about 9<sup>th</sup> grade English literature?

Well, today's lessons might suggest something like:  
'it was the worst of sins, and he was the worst of sinners'.

It was the worst of sins.  
Idolatry - worshiping anything other than God -  
was considered the worst of sins.  
And while Moses was up on the mountain, talking with Almighty God,  
the Israelites were down in the valley, worshiping a golden calf.  
It was indeed the worst of sins.

I'm not sure what we might consider  
a modern-day equivalent of the 'worst of sins',  
but up near the top of my list right now are acts of terrorism  
that take the lives of innocent people.

And I imagine that anything that us invites to wander away  
from love of God or love of neighbor,  
qualifies as the 'worst of sins'.

And, if in today's first lesson we heard about the worst of sins,  
surely in the Epistle we heard from the worst of sinners.  
Paul, by his own admission in the first letter to Timothy,  
had been a blasphemer, a man of violence,  
and a persecutor of Christians.

It was the worst of sins and the worst of sinners.

It was Mark Twain, I think,  
who once commented that human beings

are the only creatures who can blush;  
and he went on to comment that human beings are also  
the only creatures who need to blush.  
We alone have any concept of committing ‘sins’ or being ‘sinners’.  
We’re the only creatures with a ‘moral compass’.

And so we do blush.  
We blush that we must claim kinship  
with those idolatrous Israelites and with sinful Paul.  
We blush that we must claim kinship with terrorists,  
and with children who kill other children.

And we need to blush,  
because ours, like theirs, are the worst of sins,  
and we, like them, are the worst of sinners.

But then, and in sharp contrast to the worst of sins and the worst of sinners,  
along comes the Gospel - the Good News.

So even though ours are the worst of sins, and we are the worst of sinners,  
that’s not the end of the story.

The Gospel is the last word,  
and in today’s Gospel reading, the last word  
contrasts the worst of human sinfulness  
with two parables about the forgiveness and love of God.

First, the lost sheep -  
a story at some level about really questionable stewardship  
on the part of the shepherd.

How smart can it be, after all,  
to risk the safety of 99 sheep  
for the sake of only one?

And how prudent is the shepherd who risks his own life  
scrambling over treacherous terrain  
in search of one sheep so dumb that she wandered off in the first place  
and who may already be dead?

But the parable isn’t about ‘prudence’;  
nor is it about being ‘smart’ by the standards of the world.

It is instead about the extravagant - even flamboyant - love of God.  
It's about God loving so much  
and being willing to forgive so endlessly -  
no matter what the sin or who the sinner -  
that even one of us is worth going after.

Even one of us is worth dying for.  
Every one of us is worth dying for.

The other parable in today's Gospel reading is about the lost coin.  
Now there's not the same risk here.  
First, the scene isn't the rugged and dangerous outdoors,  
but the inside of a house.  
And second, the coin is in the house;  
it simply has to be in the house - somewhere.  
The lost coin will be found,  
as long as the search effort isn't abandoned.

This parable offers assurance that what is lost will be found;  
it is also assurance of God's constant and persistent devotion.  
Because the search isn't called off when night falls  
or when the 'rescue squad' gets tired or hungry  
or bored with the whole effort  
God's search for the lost is only finished  
when what was lost has been found.

Now, nowhere in either of the parables is there any suggestion  
that the wandering sheep was cute and cuddly  
or that the lost coin was shiny and valuable.  
But nowhere in either of the parables is there any suggestion  
that they have to be cute, cuddly, and shiny  
in order to be treasured.

And so it is with us.  
We're not always cute, cuddly, and shiny.  
In fact, we're the worst of sinners,  
and sometimes we commit the worst of sins.  
But still we are treasured by God  
and sought after eagerly when we're lost.

God's love embraces Paul and those Israelites,  
and you and me.  
And that is certainly Good News.

Not surprisingly, the last word in both of these parables is celebration -  
rejoicing that what was lost has been found.

What probably is surprising is where the celebration happens.  
The shepherd is so filled with joy  
that he dances home with that once-delinquent sheep  
and plops that smelly bit of livestock  
not in some pen out in the back yard,  
but smack dab in the middle of the living room -  
tracking in dirt, shedding wool all over the place,  
and stinking up the whole house.  
And the shepherd seems to expect the rest of the family  
to join in the rejoicing!

Well, if you happen to be the newly found sheep,  
that's all well and good.  
But the rest of the family might not feel quite as thrilled.

We're the family.  
We're the sheep to be sure, the lost now found and brought home.  
You might even call the Church  
God's beloved 'Lost and Found',  
and it exists primarily for the Lost.

And look what God has done with the Lost.  
God has taken the worst of sins - idolatry -  
and still managed to turn golden-calf-worshipping people, the Israelites,  
into a great nation through whom we are all blessed.

Look what else God has done -  
taken the worst of sinners - Paul -  
and turned him into one of Christianity's great saints.  
We Christians - we, the Church -  
are God's beloved Lost and Found:  
the wandering sheep who've been found and brought home,

the coin that was lost in the corner, and found.  
We've been found by God's persistent love,  
redeemed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ,  
and sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

But we're also the family.  
And in those times when it's hard for us to welcome  
one more 'smelly bit of livestock' into the fold,  
that is probably when we need to hear these parables once again.

Because what God also is doing is inviting this fellowship of the Lost  
to be the family of the Found.  
What God is doing is inviting us to be God's eyes and ears and hands and feet  
so that God's beloved Lost and Found may grow ever larger.

We may not always be stellar at it, but God has chosen us for the job.  
And even if we're not always be terrific at it,  
we can go into the world to seek the lost.  
We can seek them with something as simple as a friendly word,  
or with a 'random act of kindness'.

We've been found;  
let's help God 'find' others  
and bring them home with us.  
And there will be great rejoicing!

Amen.

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