

24TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C
“May they be one ...”

It’s an awful feeling to be lost. The loneliness that goes with it can be overwhelming. Because we’re so alone, everything suddenly seems strange and unfamiliar. We become disoriented, not knowing which way to turn. Confusion almost paralyzes us, as we don’t know if the next step will lead us closer to safety or into greater danger. I’m the kind of guy who likes to hike on trails, but my friend Father Mike McDermott (pastor of St. Charles Parish in Tacoma) is famous for hiking off trail. Many a time we’ve stopped to figure out where we were. While I felt lost, Mike would just say, *“We’re just not at the place we thought we would be at the time we thought we would be there.”* It never made any sense, but somehow it was reassuring.

Today’s first gospel story is about a lost sheep. We can just imagine the poor thing instinctively hunkered down somewhere, shaking like a leaf, hoping no wolf will find it. But the story about the lost coin gives us a clue that St. Luke’s concern is neither the lost sheep or coin, but God. The coin can’t feel lost, but like the lost sheep, it represents us. If we are lost, God will do whatever it takes to find us and bring us back. And then our overjoyed God throws a party to celebrate our safe return home.

While these stories, and the story of the Prodigal Son that comes next in Luke, usually bring to mind people who are morally lost because of sin, they are really meant to reveal to us the wonder of God’s unconditional love for us. God does not want us to be lost or to be alone. God wants us to have a family to belong to, a community we can call our own. In these stories God speaks to the human heart and says, *“Your lives are important. You have something to give to the world, and it matters that you give it. I have to find you so you can.”* Even when we feel lost and are afraid of our next step; and are tempted give up on ourselves, God does not give up on us.

God wants all people to belong to a family that believes that each member of that family is important, valued and precious, that we have something to give to the world - and it matters that we give it.

On this day when we celebrate the multi-cultural nature of our parish, we have to remember that it is still not about us, but about God's great love for us that has brought us together. I hope that those of you who felt lost when you first came here have found a home. The importance of our being a multi-cultural parish is not that we come from different countries of the world, that the color of our skin is different, or that our features are different, or that we speak different languages. While we all bring unique gifts from our cultures, what is important is that we are a family, united to one another in Christ. To pick up on the spirit of St. Paul, we are neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, Nigerian nor Korean, Filipino nor South Sea Islander, Sri-Lankan nor Native American, Mexican nor Irish (except on March 17th). We are all one in Christ. That is really what we celebrate today.

We are here because the love of God has somehow touched our hearts. And our hearts - our spirit at the deepest level - are above all human. They are the same. It makes no difference where we come from in the world. We all rejoice at the birth of a child and cry at the death of a loved one. If a child cuts a finger, that child's blood runs red and its tears are salty regardless of race. But even more so, we share a common vision of what the world could be if we all lived the message of the gospel. We believe that God calls us to belong to one another in that community we call the church. And we believe that the very nature of that Church is catholic, that is, that it is open to all people. Lest we forget, most of our Protestant brothers and sisters also pray the Nicene Creed as we do. To understand Jesus, we watch how he lived. He embraced the people who came into his life, saint or sinner, gentile or Jew, sick or healthy, old or young, rich or poor.

But we live in a world where being different is suspect, that people not like us are somehow a threat. It's a breeding ground for gangs and bullies and wars. But as followers of Jesus, formed by the power of God's Word and the grace of the Sacraments, our first reaction is to trust in the goodness of others rather than to fear them or put them down. What we are for is stronger than what we are against. Some have speculated that when the Berlin Wall fell, the leaders of our country had to find another enemy to unite us. And it is good to be united against a common enemy. But the real challenge for us as Americans today is to find something positive that unites us. And we fight over everything. What is holding us together on the inside? At times we seem to be so fragmented as a nation that I wonder if we even have a common vision that can hold us together.

Somehow, what rings true to the human heart that unites us must be made known to the hearts of our fellow citizens. As Jesus made the love of God real in our world, we must work together to make the love of Jesus real in our world. This means that we cannot rest on whatever laurels we might have, but must heal the wounds that continue to divide us as church, not only with other Christian churches, but also within our own Catholic Church. As Jesus is the sacrament of the Father, the Church is the sacrament of Jesus. If we want to know what Jesus meant by what he said, we look at how he lived. If we want the world to know what the Church means by what it says, we must invite it to look at how we live. There is no other way for us to have any credibility. I think we have work to do.

That fact that we who are so diverse can still be one is, to me, a miracle of grace. May the Eucharist we now celebrate deepen our unity to one another in Christ. May it also continue the transformation of our hearts.