

**Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C  
(Sept. 12, 2010)**

***A Father's Love***

Yesterday we remembered the tragedy that took place in our country nine years ago. There was sadness at the thought of lives that were lost, anger at these wanton acts of terrorism, fear and confusion at the sudden vulnerability that we thought could never be possible in our country. Even today reactions are mixed, and there is still fear and confusion, much emotion as people still try to grapple with an entirely new experience. Some of the anger grew quickly into hatred, and that hatred is still there, even stronger than nine years ago, hovering over hearts like the smoke that enveloped Manhattan after the planes struck the World Trade Center.

Today Jesus offers us some parables that can help us at least in some way to come to grips with what happened on 9/11. Remember the context of these three stories. At the beginning of the Gospel passage you heard how people were grumbling, grumbling because he was keeping company with disreputable characters. They were angry with Jesus, very angry; they were the good ones, they thought, the clean ones, the law-abiding, well-washed, learned, faithful, regular temple-goers. They were angry because he sat down at table with the bad ones, the dirty ones, the disobedient, careless, stupid, faithless ones, those who were never seen in the temple or synagogue.

And so Jesus looks at them all and tells them three stories about losing and finding: a shepherd loses a sheep and finds it; a woman loses a coin and finds it; a father loses a son and finds him. We all know the story of the prodigal son, and when we hear it we usually concentrate on the first part of the story about a loving and forgiving father and a son who takes his father's money and squanders it, then falls into desperate circumstances, but regrets what he has done, comes home, and finds a father waiting for him with open arms, receiving him extravagantly with fine clothes and a great celebration to show his love and joy at finding this son who was lost. And more often than not, I think, we stop at that part of the story, realizing that the father's love and forgiveness represent God's love and forgiveness,

a good and gracious God who is ready to forgive us, his prodigal children any wrong we have done.

And that is good. But there's more to the story. There is the elder brother. And it's precisely in him that we find the real meaning of what Jesus is telling those grumblers and us as well. The elder brother is indignant because the father is giving a lavish party for this wayward son of his. "I've always done the right thing," he says, "and you have never given me as much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends." But the father tells him, "Everything I have is yours; why do you complain? But your brother was lost and has been found. He was dead and has come back to life. Come, embrace him, as I have. Come and join the party." What he is saying to the elder brother is, "Be reconciled to your brother. Love him, forgive him because he *is* your brother. Don't let anger or enmity spoil your relationship. Don't let them ruin the celebration."

Now remember those grumblers that we heard at the beginning. Jesus is obviously telling them that this is what he wants them to do. Like the elder brother they say, "We have always done the right thing." He is saying to them what the father says to the elder brother. "Don't let your anger estrange you from your brothers and sisters. Don't scorn them or look down on them because they are different. Love them. And come join the party." And he says that to all of us as well.

We come here today, as we come every week, knowing that we are all in need of the reconciliation that Jesus offers and that the world so desperately needs. We come perhaps with a bit of anxiety in a week when we have remembered the tragic events of September 11, 2001, in a week when we have heard many words about the desperate situation in Iraq and Afghanistan and uncertain about when it will be resolved and exactly what the outcome will be. We come in a week when we have heard hateful words about all Muslims because of what a few have done; but we have also heard words of love, beautiful words of comfort for those who still mourn their loved ones who died in the terrorist attacks, and words about the bravery of men and women who went to Iraq and Afghanistan, who risked their lives, many of whom gave their lives, to help make our country and our world a safe place to live.

But most of all, I like to think that we come with trust and confidence

that a God who loves us all so very, very much does not give up on us – never gives up on us, searches like the shepherd for his lost sheep, like the woman for her lost coin, like the father for his lost son, and invites us all to the party. Have you ever noticed how the story of the prodigal son does not seem to have an ending? That's because it will not end until the elder brother goes in and embraces his prodigal sibling, until the grumblers come to the party, until all of us can sit down together, Americans, Iraqis, Afghans, Israelis, Palestinians, Iranians, all people who are at odds today and can enjoy the celebration that God has prepared for all of us. With the help of God may that day come soon.