

# LOVE 3 WAYS

As we were setting up for a wedding last week, the videographer asked me for the password to use our internet. I gave him our password which ends in 333. Why 333 he asked? Wait till you see the sacrament, I said, then you'll know. In the Armenian Church, echoing the Holy Trinity, we say and do everything three times. This also follows from today's reading where Jesus tells us something three times, in slightly different ways. In response to the perpetual judgements of the Pharisees, Jesus tells three related but distinct stories, providing three snapshots of the merciful heart of God. This trilogy of stories of love in 3 ways provides us great hope and comfort as we continue along our Lenten journey of prayer and repentance.

To review, the first parable in today's reading is the lost sheep, where a shepherd with 100 sheep leaves the 99 to find the one who went astray. The second is the lost coin, where a woman has ten coins, but turns her house over looking for the lost one. The third story is of the lost (prodigal) son, where a young life is lost, before returning back home. All three parables share the same basic structure: something is lost, then it is found, and finally all involved rejoice greatly. We call these parables the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son, but these are not what Jesus called them, and frankly they are not the best titles. For these stories all focus much more on the one searching than on the thing found, and so might better be called; the Searching Shepherd, the Looking Lady and the Finding Father. After all, the coin and the sheep do nothing in their stories to be found. The coin of course can't move, and the sheep apparently didn't want to. Not willing or able to walk back to him, the shepherd hoists the sheep on his shoulders and carries it home.

The prodigal son does take initiative in admitting he is lost and turning back home, but even then if you reread that parable you will see that the father runs out to the son and forgives him before the son does anything. Later in the story, the father also seeks to reconcile with his elder son who is offended at the lavish reception his prodigal brother received. So this parable really should be called the Finding Father more than the Prodigal Son, but I guess bad news sells better than good news even when referring to Holy Scripture.

Their titles notwithstanding, these parables really are about the people doing the searching; shepherd, woman, parent, not what has been found. As a result, these parables teach us much more about God the seeker than they do about we who are lost and found. In relaying these parables, Jesus is revealing the heart of God, snapshots of his awesome character and how he relates to his creation. So what are the striking characteristics in these snapshots of God? The first characteristic of the seekers in these parables, and by extension God, is that they even notice that something is missing at all. This is most noticeable in the parable of the Searching Shepherd. He has one hundred sheep to look after, but somehow he notices that one is missing. What kind of shepherd is this who is so careful and attentive to notice the loss of one out of ninety-nine? The woman who loses her coin is also very attentive. She burns her lamps in the middle of the night, turning over her house to find her lost coin. Who goes to such lengths to find lost things? God our Father does. However small and unimportant we might feel in our struggles, God is attentive and will come to our aid. We are among billions of God's children, yet God is careful, loving and attentive to each one of us, as if we were his only beloved.

A second striking detail about the character of the seekers in each of our parables and our God, is the rejoicing and celebration that results when the lost are found. It is extravagant, it is over the top, it is unnecessary. When the woman finds her coin at 2AM, it appears that she wakes up her neighbors and has a party to celebrate. When the Father finds his lost son, he decks him out with his finest ring and robe and throws such a party that his older son fumes with jealousy. It seems that the rejoicing of the seeker has no bounds when the lost are found. Who wakes up the neighbors, offends the prudent and spares no expense in celebrating our reunions with Him? Our God does; looking past whatever we have done and wherever we've been to celebrate our return home.

So what Jesus is showing us, three times, from three different angles is a portrait of a God who notices us, who constantly seeks us-and when we are found- celebrates extravagantly, beyond all measure. This is who God is and who God has always been. This is the God of scriptures who never gives up on his chosen people, despite their constant tendency to go astray. This is the God of the Armenians, who never gives up on our people no matter how

obstinate or indifferent we have been to his grace. This is our God who, like a good Father, allows us to wander from our best way so that we might find our own way back to Him. And when we do make the slightest turn to God, we will find he knows our struggle, he's come out to greet us and greatly celebrates our return home. Jesus' trilogy of stories about God the seeker are truly snapshots of love in three ways, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and always; amen.