

24 Sunday Ordinary Time C 2016

Frazee/Callaway

September 10-11

Homily

Mary, my Mother, I give myself totally to you as your possession and property. Please make of me, of all that I am and have, whatever most pleases you. Let me be a fit instrument, in your immaculate and merciful hands. For bringing the greatest possible glory to God.

It was an offense to the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus associated with men and women who, by the orthodox, were labelled as sinners. The Pharisees had a name for people who did not keep the law: they called them "the People of the Land." There was to be a thick wall between the Pharisees and the People of the Land. For example, to give a daughter in marriage to one of *them* was unthinkable. The Pharisaic regulations was clear, "When a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey." A Pharisee was forbidden to be the guest of any such man or to have him as his guest. He was even forbidden, so far as it was possible, to have any business dealings with him. It was the aim of the Pharisees to avoid every contact with the people who did not observe every detail of the law. Obviously, they would be shocked to the core at the way in which Jesus was comfortable with people who were not only rank outsiders, but sinners.

So Jesus told them the parable of the lost sheep and the shepherd's joy. The shepherd in Judaea had a hard and dangerous task. Pasture was scarce. The narrow central plateau was only a few miles wide, and then it plunged down to the treacherous cliffs and the certain devastation of the desert. There were no restraining walls and the sheep would wander.

The shepherd was personally responsible for the sheep. If a sheep was lost, the shepherd must at least bring home the fleece to show how it had died. These shepherds were experts at tracking and could follow the straying sheep's footprints for miles across the hills. There was not a shepherd for whom it was not all in the day's work to risk his life for his sheep.

Many of the flocks were communal flocks, belonging, not to individuals, but to villages. There would be two or three shepherds in charge. Those whose flocks were safe would arrive home on time and bring news that one shepherd was still out on the mountain side

searching for a sheep which was lost. The whole village would keep watch, and when, in the distance, they saw the shepherd striding home with the lost sheep across his shoulders, there would rise from the whole community a shout of joy and of thanksgiving.

That is the picture Jesus drew of God. God is as glad when a lost sinner is found as a shepherd is when a strayed sheep is brought home.

There is a wondrous thought here. It is the marvelous truth that God is kinder than people. The orthodox would write off the tax-collectors and the sinners as deserving of nothing but destruction; not so with God. We may give up hope of a sinner; not so with God. God loves the folks who never stray away; but in his heart there is the joy of joys when a lost one is found and comes home.

For those who have been caught up in sin for a long time, imagine this: it is a thousand times easier to come back to God than to come home to the bleak criticism of self-righteous people.