

I don't know about you, but I am increasingly appalled by some of the public rhetoric we hear these days. I find it disconcerting the way name calling and verbal attacks on others have become a mainstream component of public discourse. In fact, every day brings a new barrage of verbal bullets that dominate the headlines and take this vocal warfare to a new, unprecedented level. And, quite frankly, I don't see it getting better over the next couple of years. This war of words does nothing but categorize and diminish others, and at the same time create increased brokenness in our culture and society. And the brokenness spreads like a virulent virus into other facets of life, into our communities, organizations, our schools, our local governments and even our families. All the name calling, the vicious verbal attacks, and the spoken forms of assault only breed violence, hatred, fear, and contempt.

In the depth of this present cultural context, one name calling word used all too frequently is the word "loser." And in a culture which places high value on winning and succeeding, a culture in which being on top and gaining first place are what we teach our children to strive for, the concepts of losing and lostness are not only looked down upon, but they are also truly despised.

Well, today, Jesus has something to tell us about losing and being lost. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he has been teaching about discipleship. He has much to say about the way we treat the least of those among us and, in that context, he has a great deal to say about what it means to be a disciple. All along the way he has been saying things like, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” Or, “He who is the least among you is the one who is great.” And, just last week we shockingly heard him say, “Anyone who does not carry his cross like a common criminal and follow me cannot be my disciple.” None of these words describe winning as perceived within our current cultural context.

Today, we find Jesus associating with those who were considered **losers**. The despised tax collectors and sinners were coming near to him, gathering around him and listening to him. And, the Scribes and Pharisees, the most religious of people, did not take kindly to this. After all, the Scribes and Pharisees would never do something as questionable as hang out with losers. No. They attended church every Friday night, or at the very least once a month. They tithed and were big supporters of the synagogue. They did not use four letter words, they didn't eat pork, and they were always there for Rally Sunday and other important events. They were a very committed bunch of so called “good” people. They considered

themselves **winners**. And here Jesus was, attracted to the so-called outsiders, the losers, the sinners. Furthermore, he seemed to be enjoying the company of the tax collectors, the camel and donkey drivers, the tanners, the prostitutes, and all those that elite society labeled as losers. What's more – he not only welcomed them, he seemed to **value** them. Well, the Scribes and Pharisees began to grumble extensively about Jesus consorting with such losers saying, “This guy welcomes outcasts and even eats with them.”

So, Jesus, knowing their attitude toward the outsiders and toward those considered losers, told them this story: There once was a shepherd who had one hundred sheep, but one got lost, and so the shepherd left the 99 to find the one. The Pharisees smiled pleasantly to themselves because they agreed with the story; God always goes out to find the lost; that is, those people outside their church. Jesus continued; the shepherd found the lost sheep and returned, carried it home on his shoulders and was so full of joy he called for celebration. Jesus said there is **more** joy in heaven over **one** sinner who truly repents than over 99 **good** people, who don't think they are lost, who don't think that they have any need of repentance. Hmmm. The Pharisees sensed that this parable was directed at them; but they weren't sure. So, Jesus told them a second

parable. There was an old woman who lost a precious coin, not just any coin, but the *most precious* coin that she had. She quickly and carefully swept her house, looking for that lost precious coin. She finally found the coin and was so happy that she called all her friends and threw a big party. Jesus continued by saying, “And so it is with God. There is great joy in heaven over one sinner who truly repents.”

Well, the turn of the phrase at the end of these stories with words about repentance were challenging. The Pharisees sensed that Jesus was somehow talking about them and they didn't like what he was implying because it was so clear to the Pharisees that **they** were part of the *found*. **They** were the **insiders** and the “**good**” religious folk.

We live in a world in which we, like the Pharisees, too often use our differences as a means of delineating ourselves from others, *and as a means of underlining our supposed superiority*. We are blind to the fact that we are **incomplete** without the very people of whom we disapprove. We are only 99. The truth is, we are **incomplete** without the **lost**. And, true repentance happens when **our** minds are changed to such a degree that we cannot see a community as whole until **all** are **included**, and **none** are “lost.”

Like the Scribes and Pharisees, we say God is a God of love, but we tend to make that love so conditional. We tend to make it conditional on our keeping the rules, rules which are too often somewhat arbitrary habits that support our local prejudices and personal perspectives. We use these rules to bolster our own status and position. This sense of **conditional** love leads us toward, or allows us to live in, a mindset of disapproval. For some reason, fundamentally at our core we seem to think that God disapproves of us and loves us only when we fit in with what **we imagine** to be God's expectations; expectations that have an alarming correlation with our own social expectations of what is acceptable. Consequently, our **imaging** of God determines the way we treat others. And, far too often, our image of God shows that we have created God in **our** own self-image.

But, today, **all** our readings tell of a God who loves **unconditionally**, a God who has a heart for **losers**, a heart for **all** who are lost. In our reading from Exodus, God reconciles with the idol-worshipping people of Israel. In our reading from 1 Timothy, Paul bears witness to the risen Lord who calls even the violent, blasphemous persecutor that Paul once was to become a disciple and spread the good news of God's unconditional love. And, in our gospel reading, we discover a God who will **never ever** abandon the lost. In fact, in the stories Jesus shares, the entire cause of

the rescue and recovery operation is the shepherd's and the woman's determination to **find** the lost. They tell of a **God who is determined to find the lost**. The reality is neither the lost sheep nor the lost coin does a blessed thing except hang around in its lostness. And we learn from these stories the startling reality that it is precisely our sin, our lostness, and **not** our goodness, that most commend us to the **grace of God**.

Wow! The fact of the matter is we are **all** losers! We are all lost and **all** broken. But God's heart is so full of love for **all** that God sent us Jesus. And, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we see the overwhelming, unconditional love and overflowing grace of God written large for the world to see. The cross and resurrection testify to God's faithfulness in loving and rescuing **all** that are lost. In the person of Jesus, we meet a God of abundant grace. And, words like "losers" are gone because **all** are welcomed at the party God is throwing – the party Jesus hosts where he welcomes sinners and eats with them. This is the party where we **all** are called "guest," "graced," "gifted," "loved," "cherished," and "empowered." Come to the party, celebrate and join the feast.