

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



by Edward Sellner

Place an open bible and lighted candle at the center of your circle, also a clean dustpan and broom.

LEADER: Holy One, you often surprise us with your goodness and love.

ALL: You are near us when we need you, even when we don't feel your gentle presence and support.

LEADER: Help us begin to see that even in times of loss, you are there as our friend and our guide.

ALL: Teach us, loving God, the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

My father died suddenly, a week after we celebrated his 74th birthday with family, relatives, and friends. A bartender and tavern owner in small towns most of his adult life, he spent a great deal of his time listening patiently to people's stories, often into the early hours of the morning. He told me once, with more weariness in his voice than pride, that he had probably heard more confessions than the parish priest.

The pastor at his funeral confirmed in his homily the accuracy of Dad's words about his effective ministry of reconciliation behind the bar. He spoke with affection about the dynamic group of lay leaders, two of whom were my parents, that he had met 35 years earlier on his first parish assignment.

"Long before Vatican II's emphasis on the laity," he told the mourners who packed the country church, "Ed and his wife, Elaine, were actively involved in the town of Edgeley, North Dakota, and in the Church of the Transfiguration, enriching other people's lives through their service and love."

Since Dad's death, my grief continues to carve new

channels of understanding. I have begun to realize how much I learned from my father while he lived, and how much, in his absence, he is continuing to teach me. I had always equated my mother with giving me an interest in spirituality, but I realize I inherit that passion also from the silent example of my dad, who day-in and day-out revealed through his work and his many friendships, the spiritual values that he held.

Grieving has helped me claim the spiritual heritage my father left me. It has also helped me realize how, in terms of leadership, it is often the quiet, unassuming kind—my father's kind—that builds communities.

In Sunday's gospel Jesus tells three parables that scripture commentators say are about God's mercy and love for us, and they no doubt are. But the parables also describe experiences of loss that lead to experiences of transformation, great joy, new awarenesses.

● Tell about your experience of losing someone close or losing something you valued, such as your health, your job, a relationship, a goal.

GOSPEL

Your brother was lost and now is found.

NARRATOR: The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus, at which the Pharisees and the scribes murmured.

PHARISEES: This man welcomes sinners.

SCRIBES: He eats with them, too.

NARRATOR: Then Jesus addressed these parables to them.

JESUS: What man among you that has a hundred sheep and loses one of them does not leave the 99 in

the wasteland and follow the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders in jubilation. Once arrived home, he invites friends and neighbors in and says to them:

MAN: Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.

JESUS: I tell you, there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over 99 righteous people who have no need to repent.

NARRATOR: Then Jesus told a second parable.

JESUS: What woman, if she has ten silver pieces and loses one, does not light a lamp and sweep the house in a diligent search until she has retrieved what she lost? And when she finds it, she calls in her friends and neighbors.

WOMAN: Rejoice with me! I have found the silver piece I lost.

JESUS: I tell you, there will be the same kind of joy before the angels of God over one repentant sinner.

NARRATOR: Then Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees a third parable.

JESUS: A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father—

YOUNGER SON: Father, give me my share of the estate.

JESUS: So the father divided up the property. Some days later this younger son collected all his belongings and went off to a distant land, where he squandered his money on dissolute living. After he had spent everything, a great famine broke out in that country and he was in dire need. So he



Our hardest experiences can lead us to our deepest insights.

To the Pharisees and scribes who accuse him of poor choices in his friendships and associates in Sunday's gospel, Jesus responds with stories rather than accusations against them and their self-righteousness. Jesus hopes these parables will awaken them to a new way of seeing reality, a way that is Jesus' way of mercy.

The parables are about losses—a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son—and about celebrations for the found sheep, the found coin, and for the returning, repentant child. The longest parable is about a

father's losing not only the son who leaves home but also the son who has been distant for far too long and whose resentments consume him when his brother returns.

Both sons, Jesus implies, are eventually reconciled with their father who blames neither son. He does not even defend himself self-righteously. He tells each son, in so many words, that he loves him.

For the younger, the father plans a party. He does not forgive his son explicitly, but his silence implies that, for him, the past is over and forgiven. To the older son, the father says,

“All I have is yours,” giving the distinct impression that he, too, should celebrate his brother's change of heart.

On one level in these stories, Jesus is telling his critics and us that in our judgment of others or when we are most critical of ourselves, we are missing the reality that God's love and forgiveness transcend anything that they or we may have done or said. On another level, Jesus affirms that experiences of loss, of grief, and of powerlessness may be precisely the ones that lead us to new awarenesses and new reasons for gratitude.

● What did your loss do to you? When did you feel

attached himself to one of the propertied class of the place, who sent him to his farm to take care of the pigs. He longed to fill his belly with the husks that were fodder for the pigs, but no one made a move to give him anything. Coming to his senses at last, he said:

YOUNGER SON: How many hired hands at my father's place have more than enough to eat, while here I am starving! I will break away and return to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired hands."

JESUS: With that he set off for his father's house. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and was deeply moved. He ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him.

YOUNGER SON: Father, I have sinned against God and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.

JESUS: The father said to his servants:

FATHER: Bring out the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Take the fatted calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found.

JESUS: Then the celebration began. Meanwhile the elder son was out on the land. As he neared the house on his way home, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked him the reason for the dancing and the music.

SERVANT: Your brother is home, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him back in good health.

JESUS: The son grew angry at this and would not go in; but his father came out and began to plead with him.

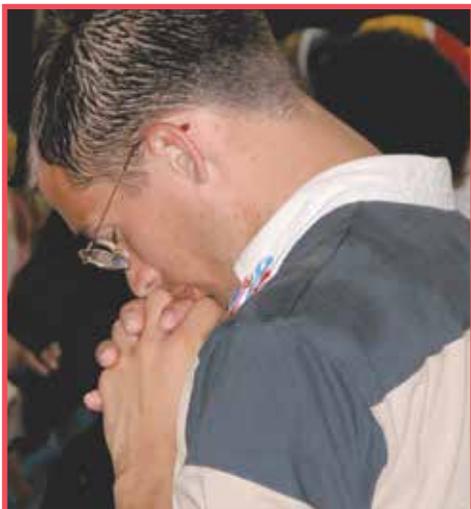
ELDER SON: For years now I have slaved for you. I never disobeyed one of your orders, yet you never gave me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends. Then, when this son of yours returns after having gone through your property with loose women, you kill the fatted calf for him.

FATHER: My son, you are with me always, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice! This brother of yours was dead, and has come back to life. He was lost, and is found.

Luke 15.1-32

darkness and fear, anger, and loneliness, wondering if God loved you or if, in fact, there was a God at all?

- How did others help you through that time?
- Who offered comfort and support?



The paradox of living that our spiritual traditions and even folktales and fairy tales acknowledge is that often the most painful times in our lives teach us the most wisdom.

For both women and men, but sometimes especially men, facing loss and expressing grief over those experiences are two of the hardest things to do. Yet for everyone these are the life tasks that must be undertaken sooner or later.

When it comes to the loss of someone whom we dearly love, grieving provides us the opportunity to accept that a person is actually gone and to incorporate into our own spirit the spirit of another. It is the

price we pay for loving others. The more deeply we love, the more we will grieve.

Grieving also offers us the chance to learn to forgive them and ourselves, something that is not self-willed, but given through the acceptance and compassion of others, and the ever-present love of God.

- What have you learned about yourself, about others, and about God from your experience of loss?
- What have you learned about the importance of someone else's help and about what you might do for those in similar situations?

Israel experiences fear, darkness.

In Sunday's first reading the people of Israel are in the midst of their exodus journey, their own dark passage through the wilderness. They are experiencing losses: the loss of their homes and the loss of a sense of direction as they wander for years in the desert. They often fear they will lose their lives, forgotten by a God who seems to have deceived them.

Like many of us who are feeling the anguish of loss and perhaps a lack of direction, they turn to false gods, false loves, in order to alleviate the pain. They build for themselves a golden calf and begin to worship it rather than the true but invisible God.

God threatens to destroy them, but Moses calls on God to remember the covenant that God made with their ancestors. Moses' courage in facing God, and facing his own perhaps earlier doubts about God's care for him and the people, resulted in God's not punishing the Israelites.

Moses intercedes.

NARRATOR: God spoke to Moses.

GOD: Go down at once to your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, for they have

become depraved. They have soon turned aside from the way I pointed out to them, making for themselves a molten calf and worshiping it, sacrificing to it, and crying out—

PEOPLE: This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!

GOD: I see how stiff-necked this people is. Let me alone, then, that my wrath may blaze up against them to consume them. Then I will make of you a great nation.

NARRATOR: Moses implored God—

MOSES: Why, O Holy One, should your wrath blaze up against your own people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with such great power and with so strong a hand? Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and how you swore to them by your own self, saying—

GOD: I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky; and all this land that I promised, I will give your descendants as their perpetual heritage.

NARRATOR: So God relented in the punishment God threatened to inflict on the people.

Exodus 32.7-11,13-14

- When have you turned to "false loves" that failed to bring you true comfort and healing?
- Recall a time when you, like Moses, cried out to God for help.

PRAY

LEADER: The clean dustpan and broom symbolize the woman's tools in searching for her lost coin. Each person in the group takes a turn, puts a coin in the dustpan, and tells about a person whose memory he or she doesn't want to lose. It can be a person important in history, in the news, in one's family or neighborhood.

LEADER: Loving God, you are the homemaker who lights a lamp and sweeps until you find us when we are lost.

ALL: Loving God, you are the shepherd who finds the lost sheep.

LEADER: You are the father who wants both sons at his party.

ALL: You sweep us into the joy of welcoming friends who share your delight in each of us.

LEADER: Where shall we donate our coins?



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