

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Luke 15:1-10

Holy Foolishness^{*}

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Earlier this week, I was cleaning out some boxes that had been sitting in our apartment, unpacked, since Michael and I moved back from Boston in 2014. At the bottom of one these boxes, I came across this notecard that I had bought a number of years ago. Can you see it? The notecard is a painted icon of Fr. Mychal Judge, the Franciscan priest from Midtown Manhattan who died in the 9/11 attacks that occurred exactly 15 years ago today.

Some of you may know that Fr. Mike has been called the “Saint of 9/11.” He was a chaplain to the New York City Fire Department. When he heard that the World Trade Center was under attack, he immediately rushed to the site. Without giving much thought to his own safety, he ran into the lobby of the North Tower, searching for any first responders who needed his help. As Fr. Mike was praying for the horror to stop, the South Tower next door came crashing down and he was killed, swallowed up by the dust and debris. His death certificate was numbered “0001-01,” indicating that he was the first recorded victim of the attacks.

It was fitting that Fr. Mike died while searching for those who were lost on that fateful morning. He had spent most of his ministry looking tirelessly for those who were on the margins of the church and society. As an openly gay Roman Catholic priest who was also in recovery for 23 years, Fr. Mike ministered extensively to the LGBT community, people with HIV/AIDS, the AA community, and the homeless.

Fr. Mike believed that he was called to go wherever God wanted him to go, regardless of whether it made sense according to the standards of this world. He was known for writing the following prayer: “Lord, take me where you want me to go. Let me meet who you want me to meet. Tell me what you want me to say. And keep me out of your way.” As one biography put it, the story of Fr. Mike’s life and death was characterized by “holy foolishness.”

In today’s gospel, Jesus tells us a parable about two persons who were also characterized by holy foolishness. The first person was a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. Realizing that one of his sheep was lost, the shepherd leaves the other 99 in the wilderness and looks for the lost sheep until it is found. He places it on his shoulders, and shares the good news with his friends and neighbors.

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If you think about it, the actions of the shepherd were not only foolish but downright dangerous. He risked the well-being of 99 sheep by leaving them in the wilderness. Not only could they have wandered off, but they could also have been attacked by wild beasts. But the shepherd was so determined to find the one lost sheep, that he risked everything that he had to do so.

The second person in Jesus' parable was a woman who lost one of her ten silver coins. She lights a lamp, sweeps her house, and searches nonstop until she finds the coin. She then calls her friends and neighbors and invites them to celebrate with her. In the Ancient Near East culture, that would have meant inviting her guests into her home for a meal – which would have cost far more than the one coin that she lost and then found. Like the shepherd, the woman was also characterized by holy foolishness.

The actions of both the shepherd and the woman made no economic sense. Yet they cared so much about the lost sheep and the lost coin that they put everything else at risk to find that which was lost – and to celebrate extravagantly with their friends and neighbors after it was found.

Jesus' parable, of course, is a metaphor for God's immeasurably deep love for each of us. A love that is infinitely stronger than the love of the shepherd for his lost sheep, or the joy of the woman who found her lost coin.

During the last week, I've been reading a number of powerful stories about Fr. Mychal Judge's life. I was struck by the fact that he wasn't just someone who searched for those who were lost. He was also lost himself throughout much of his life.

Fr. Mike grew up in a first-generation Irish immigrant household in Brooklyn, and his father died when he was only six years old. As a youth, he supported his family by earning money as a shoeshine boy. His mother was unpredictable in terms of her rage, and she often belittled him and beat him and his siblings. Fr. Mike doubted his intelligence throughout his life, and was often seized by fear and loneliness. At one point in his life he suffered a breakdown while serving in a parish, and he even experienced psychosomatic paralysis. As one of his friends wrote, "He was a very human, flawed, complex person, just like the rest of us."

And yet it was precisely those experiences of being lost that taught Fr. Mike how to be with others who were going through the same thing. He would say: "If you descend into somebody else's private hell and stand there with them, it ceases to be hell." This bears repeating: "If you descend into somebody else's private hell and stand there with them, it ceases to be hell." I can't think of a better way to describe what pastoral care is all about.

Today's reading from the Book of Jeremiah is a powerful description of not only the hell that many of us in Manhattan experienced on that terrifying morning 15 years ago, but also what it feels like to be lost from an existential perspective:

“I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins.”

And yet, God’s love for each of us is so strong that God will never stop looking for us. In the same way that the shepherd in today’s parable looked for the lost sheep, or in the same way that the woman in today’s parable looked for the lost coin, we can be assured of God’s holy foolishness in relentlessly searching for us. In fact, like the sheep or the coin, we might not even realize that we are lost – or that God has already sent out first responders to look for us.

One month after Fr. Mike’s death, a number of his friends held a festive memorial at the Good Shepherd Chapel at General Theological Seminary on Ninth Avenue. The crowd included not only priests, nuns, and firefighters, but also “homeless people, rock-and-rollers, recovering alcoholics, local politicians, and middle-aged couples from the suburbs.” The gathering was described as being “so motley, so colorful, it looked like the setup to a joke.” Indeed, one of the speakers said that “[o]nly Father Mychal could get a room like this together.”

I imagine that the crowd at the memorial looked a lot like the crowd of tax collectors and sinners that Jesus ate with and for whom he was harshly criticized by the Pharisees in today’s gospel. The point of today’s gospel is this: God loves us so much that no one is excluded from God’s realm. Absolutely no one.

Although we may sometimes turn our back on God – descending into our own private hell – God will search for us relentlessly, until we are found. And when that happens, there will be boundless “joy in heaven” and boundless joy “in the presence of the angels of God” over our return. Including from that saint of holy foolishness, Fr. Mychal Judge.