

**"Three Stories About God"**  
Homily of September 12, 2004  
by Father Brian Joyce

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Well, you got two out of three. This gospel is one where Jesus is criticized, and He counters by telling three stories. I read two of the stories to you. I left out the third story because you know it already. It is an interesting scene.

Jesus is criticized for His eating habits and for who he is hanging out with. "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." And Jesus responds by telling stories. It is really fascinating. A lot of Scripture scholars say that when you look at the gospel life of Jesus, what Jesus is doing all the time is going to meals (actually parties) and telling stories. That is what He is doing. Along the way, He does some healing and along the way, He shares a lot of wisdom, and along the way He gets people angry enough that, eventually, they try Him and execute Him. But what He is doing throughout the gospel scene is going to parties and telling stories, from Cana to the Last Supper.

There is another version where it says, "This man eats with publicans and sinners." I remember using that once at a parish and several people came up, very angry, saying, "What's wrong with eating with Republicans and sinners?" Anyway, Jesus' response is to tell three stories. He tells the story of the lost sheep, the story of the lost coin, and the story of the lost son. That's the Prodigal Son. That 's the story I think you already know.

It is funny how our minds work, with stories. In fact, that's why, I think, Jesus teaches by telling stories. There is always a major point with the story. But it gets our minds going. It raises all kinds of questions, and our minds go in different directions, sometimes mis-directions.

For me, the three stories raise three questions which are well off the main point. The story of the lost sheep, for me, raises the question, "What was the sheep thinking?" The sheep's being carried back home. The sheep is saying, "I have been bad.... I hear them working in the kitchen. They are going to have a party to celebrate something. I wonder what the main course is going to be.... Am I going to be the entree?" At this party, even if it wasn't that sheep, did they have roast lamb? That's the question it raises for me.

The story of the lost coin raises a question for me. "What was the family bookkeeper thinking? ... It's great! She found the coin! Now, how many coins is she going to spend, having this party, bringing everyone in to celebrate having lost that little old coin?"

The third story, the lost son, well I don't have to raise the question because Jesus raises it in

telling the story. The older son says, "How does this work? I am the one who stayed at home and did everything right. My brother, he left home, did everything wrong, and guess who gets the party. What's the deal?" That's the question it raises, right in the story.

Those are the questions that come to my mind. You probably, when you think about it, get a lot of your own questions. Stories do that for us. But the major point is something else. "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus responds, "Is that your criticism? OK, folks.... Guess what God is like." And he begins to tell us what God is like.... And the images He chooses are very curious. For us, they are familiar. For us, they are ordinary. But they had to be pretty shocking for His listeners.

First, He compares God to a shepherd. Shepherds were of the lowest class. They were poor. They were uneducated. Because of that, they couldn't keep the law. So, they were considered sinners, and they were not to be trusted. Then He chooses a woman, and women, in that society, were second-class citizens, and when it came to religion and learning the law and anything about God and religion, they were to stay in the back of the bus. As His third image, he chooses a father who is over-indulgent and whom other Jewish families would say was "irresponsible." So, to describe God, Jesus chooses a low-class shepherd, a second-class woman and an irresponsible father! How's that for a teaching device? And then He says, "And this is what God is like!" Our God is one Who always searches for us, no matter what. Our God is One Who is always seeking us out, no matter what. Our God is One Who always forgives us, no matter what. And our God is One Who always welcomes us home.

.... I don't know about you, but let's have a few moments of good old Catholic guilt. That's not exactly the God I grew up with! At least somewhere in my mind and somewhere in my stomach I learned that God was the One Who punishes me, and God is the One Who teaches me if I get it wrong, and God is the One Who catches up with me. And God is the One Who judges me, and with God it is payback time. And Jesus says, "No. No. No. Just the opposite!" When we wander off and we are not even the slightest interested in coming back, like the sheep, our God searches for us. When we get lost and we don't even know it, and we could care less, like the coin, our God seeks us and seeks after us. And when we really, really mess up, like the son, our God forgives and welcomes us.

But the challenge and the question put to Jesus, at least to start with, was not what is God about, but what do you think you are doing? How are you supposed to act? Who are you supposed to eat with? How are you supposed to behave? The question was about the behavior of Jesus and our behavior. Who are we hanging out with? "Are you sharing with these people?" they ask. And the stories that Jesus tell challenge us to be like Jesus and to be like our God, to look around and to say, "Who is left out?" To look around and to say, "Who is not at the table?" and "Who has nothing on their table at all?" and "Who needs forgiveness?" and "Who is being left behind?" Those challenges from these three stories are very personal and very political.

They are personal when you think about forgiveness. You know, be honest, I think everyone of us has someone they still resent, has someone they still haven't made up with, has someone they can't forget, has something they can't quite let go of. And these stories don't make it any easier, but they don't let us forget the challenge that is there for us even when we are not up to it. ....Now, that's pretty personal.

And when we look at our society, these stories are very political. They tell us, look at our society and who is not at the same table. Who is being left behind? Who is being left out? And what on earth can we do about it? Now, we may come up with different answers as to who we think is being left out in our society and we may definitely have different judgments as to how to do something about it or what to do about it. But those questions about our society, and that is what is so political about these stories, those questions need to be seriously asked and genuinely faced.

“This man welcomes sinners and even eats with them.” Yes! This man includes and shares with the least regarded and the last remembered. Yes! And as a matter of fact, so should we all. ....So should we all. Amen.