

31st Sun – ORD – C – 2010

Preached by Deacon Ron Tocci

Oct 31, 2010

If you were in our village library recently, maybe you saw this posted on their community bulletin board: LOST DOG - \$50 REWARD!... Black and tan, mixed breed, wandered from home on Oct 25th. Covered with flea bites...Left hind leg is missing. Has no hair on rump... Is blind in one eye, and was recently neutered....Answers to the name of "LUCKY!"...Maybe the name fits him because even though he's far from perfect, his master loves him enough to want him back...to look for him, to pay to get him back. I'll bet many of us have times in our life when we are like LUCKY...We've strayed from our master – our God - wandering, lost, confused...and even though we're far from perfect, our Master loves us enough to want us back...to look for us,...to pay to get us back.....And He did pay a high price; it cost Him the life of His Son. God will never give up trying to find us when we are lost, when we fall away, when we stray...He will never ever stop trying to get us back.

We know this because Jesus tells us over and over...as He did a few weeks ago in Luke's Gospel with three parables: about the shepherd combing the hills tirelessly searching for a **lost** sheep; the woman with a broom in hand scouring every corner of her house for a **lost** coin;...the father with a heavy heart, waiting and longing for his **lost** son to come home...Jesus told these stories because the scribes and Pharisees – the religious big shots – were complaining about Him hanging around with tax collectors, prostitutes and all sorts of outcasts and sinners...Jesus used the parables to show how passionately God cares for all His children, and that everyone is important to Him – especially those who have lost their way.

And in today's Gospel, Jesus demonstrates this again in His encounter with Zacchaeus – a rich tax collector... Zacchaeus was a Jew employed by the Romans to collect taxes from his own people...He was rich because he cheated them by charging more than he was supposed to...The Jewish people despised him and shunned him...He was a dirty traitor,...a sinner who had chosen money and wealth over God. But when Zacchaeus went to such great lengths to see Jesus – climbing up a tree so he could see this holy man everyone was buzzing about - Jesus called to him,...reached out to him, and Zacchaeus suddenly repented....He was a changed man, promising to give half his wealth to the poor and to repay all those he had cheated four times over....Then Jesus spoke the words we should never forget: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost."...Jesus has come to find and bring back to God all who are lost.

Lost...What does it mean to be lost?...Well according to Webster's dictionary, there are six ways that the word "lost" can be used,...but the classic definition of "lost" is simply "unable to find one's way."That makes sense especially to those of us who occasionally get lost trying to get someplace...(I'm sure my wife would say it's because I refuse to ask for directions)...Now, when Jesus refers to someone who is lost, He means it in a spiritual sense: they have turned away from God and are unable or unwilling to find the way back to Him...When we separate ourselves from God, from Jesus Christ, we are lost...When we stop coming to church to be fed by God's Word and by the Body and Blood of Christ, ...when we shut Jesus out of our lives, ...when we ignore all the things He said and did out of love for us, and let them have little effect on how we live our lives,...we are really lost!...So lost, so far away from the reason for our being that we do things that we shouldn't do...We go to places we know we shouldn't be...We are with the person we shouldn't be with...We do things that are wrong because they feel good...or they make us money...or give us power...or because everyone else is doing them and we want to fit

in...We lose contact with Jesus Christ,...the only one who can keep us on the right path...We are lost.

But the Good News is that no matter why we are lost or how badly we are lost,...Jesus will never stop trying to get us back...Like the shepherd and the lost sheep, and the woman and the lost coin, and the father and the lost son,...Jesus will never stop!...Like the theme repeated over and over on last weekend's youth retreat: Jesus is UNSTOPPABLE!Because His love for us is UNSTOPPABLE...He gives us chance after chance to come back to Him even until our last breath...The teens in my small group on retreat were shocked when I told them I couldn't be sure Adolph Hitler was in hell..."But he murdered millions of people," they said... "I know that," I said, "but what I don't know is if Jesus got him back before he died...It seems highly unlikely, but if we believe Jesus in today's Gospel, "I came to seek and save the lost,"... we know He wouldn't give up trying.

There's another way we can turn away from God – be lost to God - that doesn't involve sinful choices we make, but it can have a serious impact on how we deal with life...When we see the amount of pain and suffering in the world,...when we're shaken by the evil we see people inflict on one another,...when we're struck by great pain and suffering in our own lives,... we may find ourselves getting angry at God, asking tough questions about God...even questioning whether or not there is an all-powerful, good and loving God in control of the universe.

If we think about some of the horrible evils of the last century – like the Holocaust,... the killing fields of Cambodia,... the genocide of Rwanda (which many of us heard about firsthand when Immaculee' spoke here 3 years ago),...the over 40 million abortions in this country alone – can we help but wonder: *Where was God in all this?...*I remember after the tragedy of 9/11, people coming to our church to pray, and one of our youngest parishioners and one of our oldest asked me the same question: *Why did God let this happen?...*We watch TV coverage of earthquakes and tsunamis in which thousands die, and wonder: *Why didn't God stop it?...*We see a picture in *Time* magazine of a mother in North Africa during a devastating drought,...holding her dead baby in her arms, looking pitifully up to heaven, tears flooding her face...and we can't help asking: *How could a loving God let this baby die and leave its mother in agony when all that was needed was rain?...**Why didn't God make it rain? ...*We watch someone we love so much suffer the ravages of terminal cancer or Alzheimer's or Lou Gehrig's disease and the doctors are powerless,... and we cry out: *Why doesn't God help?*

There are some people who look at all this and say: If God is the all-powerful, good, loving Father Jesus told us He is, then all of this evil and suffering should not exist....And since it does exist, then either there is no God, or if there is a God, it's a God who doesn't care about His people, or doesn't have the power to help them...Either way, they see no God worth believing in...So these folks wash their hands of God....God is no longer a part of their lives...When trials and troubles come into their lives, they have no God to turn to for strength and courage...no God to hold on to thru the dark times...They are lost to God...and this kind of lostness is very sad because it comes from a view of God that is totally different from the God that Jesus showed us when He said, "Whoever sees me, sees the Father."

Jesus showed us a God who loves unconditionally...and who created human beings to love the same way. He created us with a free will – the freedom to choose to love or not love, because REAL love – our love for God and love for each other – has to be our choice,...or it is meaningless...But with that choice comes the possibility that some people will choose hate over love and evil over good...And like any parent whose child chooses to do wrong, God's heart breaks whenever we inflict pain and suffering on others....He has the power to stop us, but He won't because that would take away our freedom.

As for why God allows pain and suffering, whether it's caused by evil actions or by natural disasters, accidents, or disease, there is no simple answer...Books have been written trying to answer it. What makes most sense to me is that I know God's wisdom is infinitely greater than mine,...so I can accept that a loving God could allow a horrible thing to happen because He foresees that in the long run more good will come of it than if He miraculously made it go away....God showed us very clearly how this can work when He allowed His Son to suffer and die on the cross even though He could've stopped it. He let it happen so that the gates of heaven would be open to undeserving sinners like you and me...And if it happened there – if the worst evil could result in the greatest good – then it can happen elsewhere, even in our lives. Knowing that our God endured extreme suffering for us, should make our own suffering more bearable....In our suffering, God simply says, "Trust me."

Well, I've thrown a lot at you today, but here's the main thing: When we turn away from God – when we are lost – because we have chosen sin, or because we are angry at God, or we have serious doubts about God, Jesus will be unstoppable...He will keep pursuing us...He will never stop trying to get us back....He will keep calling to us, hoping that, like Zacchaeus, we will take the jump – come out of the tree – ready to repent and turn our life around...And when that happens,...when that happens... you can bet there will be more rejoicing in heaven than there would be if the Notre Dame football team won the national championship,...and that's saying a lot! AMEN.