

**Reflection on the Gospel-24th Sunday in Ordinary Time C
(Luke 15:1-32)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Those who take the gospel seriously sometimes forget that joy is a gospel value, a value repeatedly affirmed in the Gospel of Luke. While all three parables in today's gospel reading invite us into the experience of loss, loss of a valued creature, loss of a woman's means of survival, loss of an adult child's respect and presence, they likewise invite us into an encounter with God who seeks and "saves" the lost and who rejoices big time when the lost are found.

The parables are prefaced by an account of the criticism Jesus endured for hosting "the lost" of the human community, namely the toll collectors and those who were categorised as "sinners". The critics in the story are those who consider themselves "righteous". They have no room in their hearts for compassion or forgiveness on the one hand, and no capacity on the other to accept the goodness of a prophet who acts in ways that cut across their expectations.

"What man among you with a hundred sheep, losing one, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the missing one till he found it?" asks Jesus of his critics, who incidentally would not care to be identified with shepherds whom they despised as unclean. As the story unfolds, the lost sheep is sought and found and ultimately embraced by the community. The celebration that ensues is likened to the heavenly banquet of God's reign where there is more joy over one who repents than over those who have no need of repentance. Repent/repentance may seem a strange choice of words since all the action is taken by the shepherd. The lost sheep simply responds to the initiative of the shepherd who goes after it and returns it to the fold.

"Or what woman with ten drachmas would not, if she lost one, light a lamp and sweep out the house and search thoroughly till she found it?" is Jesus' second question to his critics. The pattern is repeated. The drachma, representing a day's wages, is lost, sought and found, and the community rejoices. Now and then in the biblical tradition, as here, God is imaged as a woman. God is not only the good male shepherd as in the first parable or the good male parent as in the third parable. God is also the diligent female householder who seeks and saves what is lost. No single image can contain the compassionate, loving God presented in these parables. The invitation to the believing community is to find ways of opening our hearts and the hearts of the unforgiving in our world to God's action of seeking and saving the lost-here and now, not simply in the afterlife.