Infinite Mercy

Last week I spoke about figures of speech in the Bible. Hyperboles, stories or expressions that make a point in the extreme, even if at times it is exaggerated, are an effective way to get our attention, and illustrate important truths.

For instance, saying “take up your cross daily” underlines just how important the paschal mystery is in our life: dying to self and rising a new creation, more like Christ. But it doesn’t literally mean that every day a Christian will suffer like Jesus did on the cross. We are meant to have Gospel joy too, for heaven sake!

As I thought about an important distinction between last week’s hyperbole, about hating those we love, and even our very self in order to follow Jesus, and the ones in the Gospel this week, about mercy and joy, a principal from canon law came to mind. It goes this way: Favors are to be multiplied, and burdens restricted. In other words, if a law provides a favor, or grants an exception, then that law should be applied in every case possible, interpreted broadly. If on the other hand it imposes a penalty, or restricts a freedom, it should be applied as narrowly, as little as possible. Put another way, church law must always be interpreted in favor of human freedom. Don’t you think a lot of folks would be surprised that that is what the church teaches? But ask either of our canon lawyers, Fr. Peter or Msgr Krieg …. I’m not making it up!

This may not be drawing with a straight line, but I believe it works. A similar principle can apply with hyperboles in the Bible. If something is stated in the extreme, placing a heavy burden on the believer, then generally count on applying it narrowly. It may be an exaggeration for effect. Like “if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” Or “you cannot be my disciple without renouncing all your possessions” or ‘do not call anyone father, or teacher. There is only one Father, in heaven, one teacher, the Christ” Each of these are demanding, extreme, to make a very true point, but applying them literally is not the point.

Now let’s take our 3 parables today. Each is rather extreme, one could say like a hyperbole. No, a shepherd wouldn’t 99 sheep, risking them, to go look for one lost sheep. That isn’t how a shepherd would work. But it is the way God loves and seeks the lost. A shepherd certainly wouldn’t throw a party because he found a lamb that wondered off. But heaven DOES rejoice for every sinner that comes home. A woman wouldn’t invite in all the neighbors because she found a lost coin. God DOES invites ALL of us to rejoice whenever a sinner comes home.

A father might be glad a wayward son returned, but running out to meet him? Immediately restoring him to his place with robe and ring and sandals? Immediately throwing a feast? … not a chance. But these extremes apply to God’s mercy, not our stingy human mercy. So what could be seen as hyperboles can be taken at face value. They barely even capture God’s infinite love. God truly finds incredible joy with every single sinner who repents. God truly rejoices when the lost are found. God truly runs to meet us when we make the first turn toward coming home.

Hyperboles that seem like they place a burden on us …. are just gradually drawing us a few steps closer to God. What could be perceived as hyperboles about God’s love for us….. they
aren’t exaggeration, they are attempts with human language and thinking to capture what we can never truly capture, the depth of God’s goodness and love. Not really hyperbole, they are more like understatement, helping us form a relationship with the God of infinite love, infinite mercy, infinite joy.

These three parables today are extreme. But God’s love and mercy is even more extreme. And you know what, that is extremely good news for every one of us. And for those truly deeply lost … do we have a hopeful message to offer, or what!

Admittedly we may find ourselves identifying with the elder son. The church --- you, me, church leaders --- we are all human. So too often people may see the older brother in the church in you and me, instead of the amazing loving father.

But keep spending time with these parables, let them lead you into the heart of God, the heart of Jesus. Swim in the ocean of God’s mercy, and next thing we know, mercy will begin to come more naturally in our own relationships and our own daily life.

By the way, burdens placed on others being restricted and favors amplified or extended: that’s not only good for canon law, its good for following Christ and being a Christian!