

Lost and Found

Mark Twain tells us, in his classic story *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, of how mournfully Tom's Aunt Polly spoke of his and his friends' drowning in the Mississippi River back in the 1840's near Hannibal, Missouri. "[Tom] warn't bad, so to say . . . Only just giddy, and harum-scarum . . . He never meant any harm, and was the best-hearted boy that ever was" – and she began to cry. "It was just so with my Joe [said Mrs. Harper] – always full of his devilment, . . . but he was just as unselfish and kind as he could be – and laws bless me, to think I went and whipped him for taking that cream . . . [and] it was sour, and I never to see him again . . . poor abused boy!" And Mrs. Harper sobbed as if her heart would break.

What they didn't know was that Tom was hiding in the house that night and heard these words – and quickly returned to his still very much alive friends Huckleberry Finn and Joe Harper on their island campsite and thought it would be fun to return to town in time for their own funeral. And so it happened that they hid in the church gallery while the congregation was singing *I am the Resurrection and the Life* and the clergyman eulogized them – speaking of their winning ways and rare promise – so that the congregation became so moved, it broke down into a chorus of anguished sobs, *the preacher himself giving way to . . . crying in the pulpit* - until the church door creaked and Tom, Huck and Joe entered sheepishly from the rear. Their reception was like the Johnstown Flood (anybody remember that?). *The minister shouted . . . "Praise God from whom all blessings flow – SING! – and put your hearts into it!"*

One more story about something or somebody sadly lost yet happily retrieved. Of course the pathos of Twain's episode is muted by his celebrated sense of humor. In today's Gospel we find three more lost and found stories. They reflect all the anxiety shown by Aunt Polly in the Twain account. The shepherd foolishly, recklessly leaves ninety-nine vulnerable sheep to find the lost one – so moved is he. The woman seems to spend more time than it's worth searching for a lost coin, much the way I do looking for a stamp or my hat – so agitated do I get! The father of the prodigal son spends so much if not all of his time gazing at the far horizon thinking maybe if he looks long enough his son will appear. Agitation, aggravation, anguish over something or someone lost! Of course all of this is overcome once what's lost is recovered. Then comes joy, tears, relief such as that congregation expressed upon the appearance of Tom and his friends.

But you will never fully benefit from these Jesus parables until you realize that the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost child is – YOU. And that it is YOU that God values so much that he will risk everything to find YOU, look high and low to find YOU, stifle your apologies before you can get them out of your mouth with his overwhelming embrace, his joy, his readiness to place a ring on YOUR finger, the best of robes upon YOUR shoulders, to lay out a Eucharistic banquet in YOUR honor. Can you dare believe that? If not, your faith is weak.

Tom Sawyer was impressed by how much Aunt Polly really loved him in his absence – so different from when he was around making a nuisance of himself. You

have never been a nuisance to God, no matter how much you think you have – for God is God, too big to be anything but absolute about your God-given worth. He does not renege. He will find you wherever you may hide.