

I don't often have nightmares, but when I do - nine times out of ten they go like this; I'm somewhere with my daughter - who in my dream is very young.

We are doing something: we're at a church doing services, or shopping in a mall, maybe at a fair- when suddenly I realize she has wandered away from me, and is lost. I can't describe how upset this makes me, and I frantically search for her. I can honestly say that these dreams wake me up with my heart pounding. Many times, I would have to go into my daughter's room and touch her to assure myself she was still there.

I don't think I've ever been that terrified in real life- just in my dreams when my child is lost.

Interestingly, as scared as I am in the dream that I can't find Zoe- I'm even more upset to think about how scared she must be: to be alone and unable to find me.

I wonder if God feels this way?

I wonder if when we wander away from God, God worries about us, searches for us, worries about how alone we might feel without him. I think if we are indeed made in the image of God—the answer is yes.

We humans seem to be hard-wired to look for lost things. We see a poster for a lost dog and our heart is tugged and we find ourselves looking for it. A child is missing, and police, neighbors, and even complete strangers search the woods for her for as long as it takes to find her, while others worry long distance via papers and television.

When an old woman in my last parish- who was suffering from the early stages of dementia- didn't show up for church one Sunday—we all noticed. We called her children. All they knew is that she'd left for church that morning in her car. No one had seen her since.

About two dozen parishioners began driving around Little Rock in their cars until someone found her. She had been sitting in her car for hours. She didn't know where she was, but she knew someone would find her. And we knew we wouldn't give up until we found her.

It seems to be a mark of the kingdom that we are hard-wired to look for lost things.

The kingdom of heaven is built by people who realize that the lost ones need to be found—not so that we can batter them with rules and theological insights and “save” them, but because we care for them—especially the vulnerable in our midst.

In the gospel today, Jesus is continuing a conversation that began in last week's reading. The leaders of Jesus' religious community, the Pharisees, are taking Jesus to task for talking and eating with sinners, tax collectors, and other people the religious leaders have said were not worthy to be part of the faith community.

Jesus turns to them and tells them this story of the lost sheep. He uses the example of *shepherds and sheep* to describe who *God* feels is worthy of his attention. It's an example his listeners would have understood.

Since very few of us here are shepherds or raise cattle—I'll use an example we are more familiar with.

Now, I know I'm rushing the season a little—but many of you may remember the story of Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. Here we have a story of a reindeer, and an elf who wander off and eventually become lost.

They have wandered off because they have been called misfits by other members of their community. They are told that – for whatever reason—they don't “fit in.”

Their communities eventually realize that they are really the ones to blame for these little ones being lost, and they search for them.

Meanwhile, the reindeer and the elf discover others who have also been told that they are misfits, and to get lost. By the end of the story—everyone is found, they are reunited with each other, and discover to their surprise that sometimes it's the unusual gifts and talents among the group that ultimately save the day.

Yes folks, Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer is a modern day telling of the parable of the lost sheep.

This Christmas story, the story of the sheep, and the story of the woman with a lost coin—all paint a picture of how precious all things are to God—even the smallest coins, the youngest sheep, the oddest reindeer.

These stories remind us that in this Kingdom Jesus is building, there is no person, animal, or part of creation that is too small, too different, or too insignificant to be worthy of God's care.

And the people God chooses are not necessarily the ones the religious leaders accept: Jews, gentiles, males and females, sinners, outcasts, lost sheep, red-nosed reindeer and even people who collect taxes!

And how do the religious leaders react ? We'll hear that next week.

God cares for every lost thing. Even though some are lost, and some are told to *get lost* --they are lost just the same--and being lost is frightening.

But Jesus assures us that Love will find them all. Amen.