

A man asked for an appointment, came into the priest's office and sat across from him. The priest didn't know the man. He had no idea why he wanted to see him. Was he looking to get married? Perhaps he was married and there were there problems at home? Had he come to ask about entering the church?

"How can I help you?" the priest asked.

The man just looked at the priest and shook his head. After a few minutes of silence, the man said, "Father, you are looking at a lost soul. I have done things, incredibly bad things throughout my life. My family wants nothing to do with me, and I don't blame them. I was married for twenty years and unfaithful for most of them. I didn't just cheat on my wife; I did everything possible to ruin her life.

I haven't talked to my children in five years. The last thing I said to them was that I wasn't going to be their father anymore. Can you imagine saying that to children? I send checks to support them, but I do it through the court system, and I only do what the law requires me to do.

I have no real friends. I have plenty of former friends, whom I used to advance my career, or I used for whatever else I could get from them. You name it; I have done it. I'm despicable, and I know it. I have fought God at every turn of my life; making it very clear that I refused to let anything and anyone, including God, change my life. Father, I am a lost soul. I'm sure you want to throw me out of this office. But first, would you please just answer this question: Is there any hope for me?"

Now, it would have been easy for the priest to say, “Look, why don’t you just make a good confession and move on with your life.” And the priest would eventually say something like that, but the priest realized that the man first needed to hear about God’s forgiveness for that to make sense. So, he read him this Sunday’s Gospel, the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Then he told the man, “Don’t you realize, there are no lost souls in this life? Like, the shepherd who found his missing sheep, the woman who found her lost coin and the father who saw his son walking across the field coming back to him, God is bursting with joy when someone who has been lost is found. Don’t you realize how excited God is right now that you are here in this office hoping that there is a slight chance you can be forgiven? Don’t you realize that if he had to come down from heaven, become a man and be crucified just for you, He would do that?”

And then the priest spoke to the man about what amends he could possibly make. The simple truth is that you can’t accept forgiveness without that changing you and without you changing your life. The man broke down, cried, and said he’d do whatever he could. Finally, the priest heard his confession and welcomed him home.

There are many people who think they are lost souls. Perhaps you know some of these people. We have a responsibility to let them know that they are not lost. There are many people who are convinced that their sins are so terrible that God would never forgive them. You may ask me, “Does anyone really believe that God would not forgive him or her?”

Well, if you ask then, thank God, you haven't met people suffering the consequences of the choices they have made or worse the effects they had on others. Many of them believe that they cannot be forgiven, even after they go to confession. There are people who see no value to their lives. They have given up on themselves and have lost all sense of their own self-worth. It's a terrible spiral – they think they can't do anything good and so they don't even try.

Perhaps some of the people we know have given up on themselves as lost. We may be tempted to agree with them. They have hurt us and the people we love. But if we were to give up on them, we would be contributing to the evil that wants these people to believe that they are worthless. The destruction of self-esteem is a triumph for evil. The work of the followers of Jesus Christ is to help others return to their rightful dignity as sons and daughters of God.

Every family has its crazy uncles and aunts. Every family has its black sheep. We can usually deal with those who are eccentric. We can look past their behavior saying, "Uncle Bert doesn't have a whole lot of social skills," or "He has his ways, but underneath Uncle Bert's a really good person." We can deal with the crazy uncles and aunts, but it is difficult to deal with the black sheep. It is difficult to care for those who reject our families, our families' values, and who seem to be happy hurting others and themselves. But we cannot give up on them. We do not have that right to let them believe that they are lost souls.

This isn't being naïve. It may well be that it's useless to talk to the family's black sheep. We may not be able to keep our doors open to them; their problems might be such that we have to protect our immediate family. But we can keep the doors of our hearts open to them. We can pray for them. We have to. There is nothing worse we can say to someone than, "You are dead to me." What would our lives be like if we were to hear those words coming from God? But we would never hear these words from God. He refuses to give up the search for the lost sheep, the lost coin, or the lost son.

A number of years ago a priest gave a day of recollection for a small convent of religious sisters. After his talk, he told the sisters that he would be willing to meet with any of them individually. Well, every one of them came in to see him. And they all began with the same questions. "How do I deal with Sister Miriam? She's impossible? She dislikes everyone. She has nothing but negatives to say about everyone. She's unhappy and does her best to make us all unhappy." Sister after sister came in with the same story. Finally, who do you think is the last sister to come in? Sister Miriam. "Father," she said, "I have no friends here. I don't need them." He thought for a while and then said, "Sister, I want you to do this, and do it every day. First thing in the morning, just say to yourself, '**God loves me with an unconditional love. He loves me for who I am.**' Then say, '**God forgives me, I need to forgive myself.**' And finally say, '**God is with me today. When I try to do things alone, they don't come out so good. But I am not alone. I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.**'"

Now, I tell you, Sister, you make these three brief meditations every day and your life will change.” Eight months later, that same priest was giving a conference for a large group of sisters from various congregations. The sisters from that little convent were also there. Sister Miriam went up to him and asked, “Father, can I speak to you for a moment?” “Sure,” said Father. The sister told him, “I’ve done those little meditations every day since I saw you last, and now, Father, I have friends.”

Why did this happen? It happened **first of all** because sister realized that God really did love her, and He forgave her. Now that she recognized her own value, she didn’t have to transfer her disappointment with herself on the other sisters. And it happened, **secondly**, because the other sisters refused to give up on her, but happily welcomed her back into their friendship.

When we encounter someone who seems lost, we can tell them that they are loved but we can’t make them hear it. We can let them know that it’s possible to start over but we can’t take that first step for them. In the end sometimes the only thing we can do is pray that God crack open their narrow view of themselves and the world around them and keep reminding us how painful that first step might be for them. With the Lord there are no lost souls. There are just people who need to know that they are so valuable that God longs for the day when He can rejoice with the angels that what was lost has now been found.

