

One of my favorite things to do, when I have some free time, is to watch movies! I think this is because they provide me with the opportunity to escape reality for a bit, as I get caught up in the drama, action, and romance that takes place on the big screen. Like many of you, I love Summer Blockbusters, especially the ones that have those scenes that are so over the top that they leave you thinking, “yeah right, that could only happen in the movies!” The characters in these types of films usually possess an awesome set of skills that allow them to do almost anything. Did you know that any lock can be quickly picked with a credit card or paper clip? Only in the movies.

“Raise your hands if you have ever seen the following typical action scene in the movies. Zoom in on a hand tossing a cigarette butt and in slow motion it tumbles into a pool of gasoline, creating an enormous fireball.” Sure, just about everybody has seen this. It’s an ear-splitting, eyebrow-singeing, cinematic spectacle. Guaranteed to please the action-adventure crowd. It’s also largely make-believe, one of the many things that happen — **ONLY IN THE MOVIES!**

Richard Tontarski is an expert in forensic fire at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms research laboratory in Beltsville, Maryland. He became interested in the link between cigarettes and gasoline, because arson suspects frequently claim that a gasoline fire was started by accident. So, Tontarski and his colleagues went to great pains to create fireballs. They dropped burning cigarettes into trays of gasoline. They sprayed a fine mist of gas at a lighted cigarette. In more than 2,000 attempts, the gasoline did not ignite. Tontarski could only guess why, reports an article in a magazine called *The Guardian*. He believed that perhaps the layer of tobacco ash prevented ignition, or that gasoline vapor naturally moves away from the hottest part of the cigarette. Disclaimer: Please, do not try this at home. Do not research this topic yourselves.

There are a ton of things that happen only in the movies, and they should never be confused with real life. The Nostalgia Central Web site lists 40 of them, including:

- The Eiffel Tower can be seen from any window of any building in Paris.
- Plain or even ugly girls can become movie-star-pretty simply by removing their glasses and rearranging their hair.
- Anyone can land a 747 as long as there is someone in the control tower to talk you down.
- And, in line with the cigarette-and-gasoline phenomenon: Cars will explode instantly when struck by a single bullet!

Is this true? Only in the movies! Reading the Bible is sometimes like going to the movies, in the sense that we encounter stories that don't quite ring true. In the book of Numbers we encounter a talking Donkey, in the book of Jonah we read about a man spending three days in the belly of a whale, and in our Gospel story for today we observe Jesus telling a parable about a shepherd leaving 99 sheep behind to look for a lost one, and a woman throwing a party to celebrate the finding of a lost coin? Would anyone actually *do* that?

It seems unreal ... like in the movies, when one person starts dancing in the street, and then suddenly everyone else starts to dance along with him. Somehow, magically they know all the steps! The lost sheep and the lost coin. *These are things that happen Only in the Gospels!* But maybe stories from Scripture point to a deeper truth, one that is even more real than the day-to-day existence we experience. Perhaps the stories of the gospel are God's truth, not human truth.

Let's go behind the scenes and see. As today's passage from Luke begins, Jesus' heart is crushed, and he is moved with empathy by a number of tax agents and lowlifes who have come to listen to him. This drives the religious crowd nuts because they have no respect for tax collectors whom they regard as collaborators with the oppressive Roman Empire, and they have even less regard for the disreputable who break not only moral laws but also the laws of Jewish ritual

purity. With venom, the Pharisees and the scribes grumble, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

In response, Jesus tells a couple of parables, something he would often do to get the attention of the crowd, and to help them really take the time to think about an idea he was trying to get them to understand. His first story describes a shepherd with 100 sheep, who loses one and then leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness to go after the one that is lost. Now that doesn’t sound like sensible shepherding, but it certainly underscores the shepherd’s love for each and every one of his sheep. He goes and finds the lost sheep, and then lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

The shepherd’s success at finding the lost sheep — without losing the other 99 that were left behind — is kind of like the remarkable fight scenes we see in martial arts movies. In those films, if the hero is heavily outnumbered in a fight, his opponents will patiently wait to attack him, one by one, dancing around him in a threatening manner until he has defeated the person right in front of him. It would be easy to think that this type of shepherding happens only in the gospels.

But this story is not about a human shepherd — it’s about a divine shepherd. It is about the Lord God who feels joy because he has found a missing sheep, and he invites us to lay aside our skepticism and rejoice along with him when he carries that lost sheep home. “Just so,” says Jesus, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

More joy over the tax collector who repents than over 99 Pharisees. More delight over the prostitute who repents than over 99 scribes. More rejoicing over the drug dealer who repents than over 99 clean-and-sober Christians. More happiness over the career criminal who repents than over 99 law-abiding citizens. Hey, wait — that doesn’t seem right, does it?

We'd like God to feel some joy toward us, and he often does, but he also wants us to share in his happiness for he says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Through the words of Christ, we are called to understand that God also wants us to celebrate with him, and for good reason. One way for us to do this, is for us to reverse our understanding of the lost. Rather than seeing the unchurched, those with no faith, or those of a different religion as the lost who need to be found, we might consider ourselves to be incomplete without those for whom Christ has also died. In other words, we are lost without them.

This kind of stuff happens only in the gospels, and in the kingdom of God. John Dominic Crossan, a prolific Bible scholar who specializes in the historical Jesus, makes the point that the parables "ask how God would run this world if God sat on Caesar's throne." That's a fascinating perspective. We live in a world run by secular powers, one in which a succession of human leaders — some Democrat, some Republican — sit on Caesar's throne. Their decisions shape our world and influence our understanding of what is right and what is wrong, what makes sense and what doesn't.

But what if *God* sat on Caesar's throne? If he did, how would God run this world? That is what Crossan says this parable is all about. But it is also about what gives God pleasure. God would run this world in a way that brought pleasure and joy. Obviously! So, what is it that gives God pleasure? • When the lost are found; • when the broken are healed; • when the alienated are reconciled; • when the sick are made well; • when those who are dead are made alive; • when the oppressed are lifted up; • when the prisoner is released; • when the humble have been exalted.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day could not find true happiness, they did not know what actual joy looked like. They didn't understand the things that really made God happy. They couldn't picture a God who is a fist-pumper who shouts "Yes!" every time a lost lamb finds its way back to the fold. They couldn't see all

the chest-bumping, the high fives, the fist-bumps going on in heaven when something like that happens.

That's the action-call of this story: Which begs the question, what has happened to our joy? What has happened to this sublime sense of sharing in the pleasure of God when the brokenhearted are comforted, and when the weak are made whole?

It is also the message of the second story that Jesus tells in our Gospel lesson for today. That parable tells of a woman who has 10 silver coins, each one worth about a day's wage. It's not a huge amount of money, but it's quite precious to her, so when she loses one of the coins she lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and then searches carefully till she finds it. In the 2nd parable, it's not the searching that seems odd, it's the party that follows. She calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost."

Can you imagine getting an invitation to a "lost coin found" party? Only in the gospels. The point of the story is the celebration. And Jesus nails this down when he says, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." The question for us is this then....: Are we willing to join the celebration? If our lives are going to be in line with God's truth, we're going to have to put on our party hats.

The problem is that Caesar is still on Caesar's throne, and we tend to play by his rules. We reward people who do the right thing, and we commend those who stay out of trouble — as well we should. But I wonder, if in some way we have lost our sense of joy for working with the lost: those who are candidates for restoration, recovery and discovery. After all, if we are honest with ourselves there are times when we behave like the scribes and the Pharisees, and we do so by ignoring the homeless, the harlot, the habitual user, or those who are different from us that we don't understand.

But God wants us to start behaving in ways that are seen only in the gospels. Jesus tells us that God's kingdom is coming, and that Caesar will not be sitting on his throne forever. The challenge for us, then, is to join God in feeling mercy toward those who are lost, and to whoop it up when they repent and return to the community of faith. Paul makes this explicit in Colossians 1: Reconciliation is what gives God pleasure. "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things."

Moreover, when we share in God's joy, *it empowers and strengthens us to continue in the work* of reconciliation, the "searching-for" business described in our two parables. The ancient Hebrew leader, Nehemiah, reminded his ragtag remnant of exiles that "the joy of the LORD is your strength." When the lost are found, God throws a party and wants us all to join the celebration. There's nothing unrealistic about it!

May we be like the ancient Hebrews of old who, when they heard Nehemiah's declaration, they all "went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them." So, when God helps us find the lost, or brings them to us, or if they somehow manage to find their own way home, let's celebrate, let's rejoice, let's party! Thanks be to God. Amen.