When I was seven or eight years old my family and some other family friends took a trip to SeaWorld up near Toledo. It was a trip that I will never forget. We were walking around viewing the various attractions around the park when we stopped to look at a billboard with the schedule of the day for the various shows that SeaWorld was known for. Within moments, as I was looking at some of the cool things we were going to do I realized that I was separated from our group and was standing there alone among a large group of strangers. I looked frantically in every direction but didn’t see anyone I knew. THEY WERE JUST HERE! WERE DID THEY GO AND HOW COULD THEY LEAVE WITHOUT ME??!! Those of you from large families know EXACTLY how this happens: someone else is always watching everyone else, right?!

One of the park employees finally saw me and realized that I was in distress and lost. They calmed me down and took me to an information booth that was fairly close by and sent out the message to other park staff that there was a lost boy at the booth. For what seemed to be an eternity, I sat on a stool in the window of that booth watching other people coming and going and having fun, while constantly scanning the crowds for clothing, colors, hats, faces, anything that was familiar. The employee who was with me in the booth was trying to comfort me and reassure me that everything was going to be ok. I was lost and all I wanted was to be with people I knew, doing what everyone else was doing. It was a very scary, helpless and nerve racking experience. After about an hour or so, I was reunited with my family and left the information booth and all of the sudden as a result of my relief and joy, my tears finally stopped.

Fast forward nearly 25 years and once again I found myself sitting in a booth, once again lost and once again feeling very scared, very nervous and feeling helpless. This time it was a confessional booth and the “employee”, if you will, was a priest who also was trying to comfort me and reassure me that everything was going to be ok. This time, however, I wasn’t quite as sure. I had purposely avoided this booth for around 16 years or more because I convinced myself that I didn’t need it. Once again I was lost but this time it was of my own doing and this time it seemed much more serious. However, after about 15 minutes that SEEMED to be an hour or more in the confessional I left that booth also relieved and full of joy at being reconciled but this time my tears began to flow.

Each of us gets lost at times through the course of our lives. Sometimes it happens suddenly and dramatically and other times it happens over time without us really realizing it. Our readings today are about being lost but more importantly they are about being found and the joy that comes about as a result. Ultimately though, these readings show us the incredible Love that God has for us in spite of our sinfulness through His even more abundant and infinite Mercy.

In our Gospel today, Jesus addresses the Pharisees and scribes with three parables in order to help them understand that the true purpose of His mission is to gather those who are lost as evident by “Tax collectors and sinners [who] were all drawing near to listen to” Him. However, in
doing so Jesus is also trying to show the jealous and complaining religious elite that they, themselves, are some of the lost that He came to find though they didn’t know it because they were blinded by their own self-righteousness.

These parables are so familiar and powerful, especially when coupled with the first reading from Exodus where God upholds His covenant despite Israel’s idolatry, then again in King David’s great Psalm of contrition after taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite whom he had killed, and again in Paul’s honest acceptance of his previous sinfulness during his life as a righteous Pharisee in his letter to Timothy. In fact, Paul sums up the entire message of these readings and parables when he simply states, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” We are all sinners and are all lost as a result of those sins at times. As such, today we too draw near to listen to Jesus in the hopes of experiencing the joy of being found and saved through God’s tenacious Mercy. We have the opportunity to experience this mercy every time we receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation and every time we receive the Eucharist. In both instances and in all of the sacraments we are picked up and carried on the shoulders of Christ who anxiously seeks us out; who lights a lamp and searches carefully for us; who runs out to meet us and welcomes us to a banquet of communion with Him. God’s mercy and Love are greater than our ability to be lost regardless of how we got lost in the first place. Though we all may find ourselves lost at one point or another, we can always trust that if we have a little patience and a lot of faith, He will find us and our tears of sorrow will be turned to tears of joy.