

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who never gives up searching for the lost, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

I think the last movie PJ and I went to see at the theater was John Wick 3. The John Wick series is about a man played by Keanu Reeves who is a former hit man for the mob. After being out of the “business” for a while, he encounters the son of one of his former associates. The son kills his dog and steals his Mustang setting in motion a seemingly endless spree of revenge that now spans three full length movies with at least one more coming soon, maybe next year... Here’s the thing, I love action adventure movies as much as the next person, but in some movies I sit there and think, “that can only happen in the movies.” For example, in all the John Wick movies, he fights using karate or Judo or some other form of martial arts. Even though John Wick is greatly outnumbered, only one of his enemies attack him at a time. All the others just wait around in a circle, waiting for their turn to attack. This is a common movie scenario, but I think in real life several of the attackers would come at once and simply overpower the hero... Another “only in the movies” moment is the gun fights. In John Wick and so many other films, the good guy never runs out of bullets and hardly ever misses the target, while at the same time the bad guys, armed with bigger gun that are usually automatics never seem to hit the target and they are always jamming or out of bullets. Only in the movies does the hero save the world at the very last minute.

Only in the movies does the hero fall in love and get the princess while the bad guys always get what's coming to them. I'm certain you can come up with your own list of "Only In The Movies" moments...

Today in our Gospel text we have two parables told by Jesus that remind me of those scenes that happen "only in the movies." I call these "Only in The Gospels" moments. In the first parable, Jesus says the Good Shepherd leaves the 99 sheep in the wilderness to go off looking for that one pesky lost sheep. I don't think that's the way real life shepherding works. Back in June this year I accidentally left one of the gates open and our alpacas made the great escape. By the time I discovered the jailbreak the alpacas were 3 doors down and heading to an open corn field. I filled one of the feeding buckets with some of their alpaca treats and began coaxing them back home and into their own pasture. All but one followed me. Now, here's the real-life version, when that one alpaca refused to follow the rest, I did not leave the others and go after the one lone straggler. Instead I made sure I rounded up the willing followers and then went back for the straggler. Real life is sometimes different than in the movies or even in the Gospels...

The second parable that only happens in the Gospels is this story about the woman who loses one of her coins valued at about a day's wages. It's realistic to search the house to look under the furniture to sweep the floors and even look and

clean between and under the cushions of the couch and lazy boy recliners. I also understand the joy she feels when she finally finds the money. Here's the part I think only happens in the Gospels, after finding the coin the woman throws an elaborate party, inviting all her friends and neighbors. The party probably cost as much as the coin was worth in the first place. How does this story compare to real life? I've lost money before... One time I lost a \$100-dollar bill. I searched everywhere. After quite a long time I finally found it in my old wallet that I had replaced several months previously. I was very happy and even considered this kind of like found money because I had written it off as a loss and now it was found... What I did not do was throw a party and invite all my friends and neighbors to help me celebrate...

So, what in the world is Jesus trying to teach us in these stories where things happen seemingly only in the Gospels? Is it about repentance or something else? My best guess is it's about something else. If these parables were about repentance they sure are confusing. I mean how can a sheep or a coin repent? No, these parables are not primarily about repentance. To help us discover what Jesus is teaching about we need to look at the whole story and put these parables into the big picture of what was happening around Jesus at the time he told them.

Jesus has been in ministry for a while and tax collectors and other sinners were attracted to his message of forgiveness and salvation. The more these

undesirables came to Jesus, the more the religious elites grumbled and complained. They even asked Jesus' disciples why Jesus would bother spending one minute on these bad, bad people... Why, he's even eating with them...

Into this context Jesus tells his stories of lost and found. I say these cannot be stories about repentance because there is no aha moment where the sinner realized the error of his or her way and changes course to be back on the track God prefers for our lives. The sheep didn't even know he was lost. The coin in an inanimate object, incapable of any rational thought. These parables are not about repenting, but they are about God's infinite love that keeps searching for the lost and brings them back to the fold even if he has to carry them on his back. They're stories about a love so big, God will never stop until that last lost one is safe. These are stories of God's Grace because God acts for you and for me.

One key to understanding the main point God wants to make is by looking closely at the part of the story that can only happen in the Gospels. These "Only In The Gospel" moments are put there precisely to catch our attention and make us look deeper. In these cases, it's pretty easy to understand Jesus was telling those religious leaders that when God finds and returns a lost soul there is so much joy in heaven. On the other hand, those who already reside under God's reign in the Kingdom of God are already experiencing the sheer joy of being in the presence of God, or at least they should be... They're already seated at the table of the eternal

party, the wedding banquet of the Lamb, as Jesus called it. There's plenty of joy for all who are gathered around the table of the Lord, but when God finds and returns one who was lost, it adds to the joy already at the feast of the Lamb. Everyone gathered at that table rejoices as another soul is added to the celebration. The religious leaders of Jesus' day could feel no joy at any of these God moments because they were so caught up earning God's favor with their own works of the Law. They were already righteous, in their own minds at least, and couldn't identify with these sinners who were so attracted to Jesus and his message of love and salvation.

I wonder what other "Only in the Gospels" moments make God and all the hosts of heaven rejoice. Here's a partial list I came up with: 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.

So, the next time you're watching a movie and one of those "Only In The Movies" scenes begins where the cast spontaneously breaks out in song or dance and miraculously everyone knows the words to the song and every dance step is precisely choreographed, think about the many Bible stories that also "Only Happen in the Gospels." May we never develop the kind of attitudinal problems the Scribes and Pharisees had in thinking we're better than those sinners... May

we instead adapt to Jesus way of thinking and embrace the lost and sinful, bringing them back to Jesus. May this be a house where sinners feel welcomed and loved and may joy fill this place to the rafters every time we, who are all lost sinners from time to time, return to thank and praise the God who created, redeemed, and sanctified us all. Amen.