

“Lost and Found”

GROWING STORIES: The Parables of Jesus

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Luke 15:1-10

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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We are in our second week of our summer sermon series about the parables of Jesus. Parables were a favorite teaching technique of Jesus. They are simple stories that help us to think about the world in ways that we perhaps would not otherwise notice. Last week, Pastor Charlie introduced us to a quote from C.H. Dodd that explains what a parable is: “At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt to its precise application to tease the mind into active thought”. I think this is a great definition of a parable. Unfortunately, I think we as Christians run the risk of losing the ‘active thought’ aspect of listening to parables. Too often, we close our ears to hearing different possibilities that a parable can mean to us. What happens is that the parables get repeated and repeated until they no longer serve as stories, but as shorthand for a moral lesson that we were taught when we were young. And that’s good! The idea of being a ‘good Samaritan’ is great, and the more people we tell to be ‘good Samaritans’ the better. The thing is, though, that the story of the good Samaritan is more than just a story about changing someone’s tire on the side of the road – it’s also about transgressing cultural boundaries to love your neighbor, about radical hospitality, about so many things. When we reduce the meaning of the parable to one little thing then we lose the bite that the parable had; we lose its edge.

Amy-Jill Levine is a Jewish woman who teaches New Testament studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. She is an expert in the New Testament, and recently wrote a book called “Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi”. (mention Adult Ed class, show book) In this book, she imagines what it may be like to be a first century Jewish audience hearing these parables for the first time. She talks of how we have ‘domesticated’ these parables; made them palatable for our modern ears. But the parables originally were edgy and provocative, unusual and arresting. When talking about Jesus’ parables she says, “if we hear a parable and think, ‘I really like that’ or, worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough”. Through the course of the book she argues in favor of an open reading of the parable, one that keeps the possibilities alive. In this way, we keep our hearts open to seeing the story in ways that we otherwise would not have been able to before.

Listen to the words of Jesus in Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ “Or what woman having ten silver coins, ^[a] if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she

has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

So, there are the parables. The lost sheep and the lost coin. The two parables that precede the story of the Prodigal Son. These are the parables as presented by Luke. I know I talked about how our modern impulse is to domesticate the parables, but if you look at the way that we were handed down to us, it seems that the domestication started thousands of years before we received them. Listen to how Luke's version of the parable ends, "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance". Do you see how Luke interprets the parable just as Jesus is finishing telling it?

Here's another parable for you: A dog is driving from Madison to Milwaukee. He obeys the speed limit and arrives at his destination. Once he gets there he tries to parallel park and dings the front bumper of the car behind him. A pedestrian witnesses this and says, "it's ok, buddy, we all make mistakes". Just so it should be with you, as you encourage your neighbor.

Do you see how by adding the last sentence, I closed the parables to other interpretations? In that way, the story I told is reduced to just one interpretation – encourage your neighbor. What about the dog? Is there any significance in Madison or Milwaukee? Those questions become no longer available when the text closes the meaning of the parable right after telling it. Not that the proposed interpretation is invalid, just that when it becomes the only interpretation available the story loses some of its richness.

Luke's version of the parable of the lost sheep is not the only time that it appears in the Gospels. Matthew also contains the same parable. Here's Luke's ending,

“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”. Here’s how it ends in Matthew “So it is not the will of your^[c] Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost”. The post script from Matthew provides a different interpretation of the parable than Luke’s does. That is because Matthew and Luke were both written at a certain time by people who were writing to particular community issues. What does that mean for us? Which interpretation of the parable is more authoritative? Ultimately, the fact that the Gospels themselves interpret the story two different ways helps me to understand that there are additional interpretations beyond just the two provided by scripture.

So maybe instead of reading Luke 15:1-10 we should just read parables themselves. “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’” ... ““Or what woman having ten silver coins,^[a] if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’

Traditional interpretation of this passage tells us that we humans are the sheep or the coins, whether we’re the lost one or the one’s in the crowd depends on the day, and that the shepherd and the woman is God who seeks us diligently, finds us, and rejoices in having found us. Even this interpretation, spelled out as it is, contains some incongruencies, helpfully highlighted by Amy Jill Levine. She says, “There was no repenting in the story; there was no sin; the sheep did not ‘come to itself’ and find its way home. It was the owner who lost the sheep, and if this

losing were sinful, he's not seen repenting". So, let's look some more, with an open eye towards interpretation. What do we know about the shepherd or the woman? We know some things, they would go to great lengths to find what they lost. The shepherd seems able to quick count 99 sheep and realize one is missing. He cares for his sheep, carrying the lost over his shoulder. He may be a bit irresponsible, leaving 99 sheep in the wilderness to find only one. The woman can save money, though not an exorbitant amount. A Drachma is worth about one day's labor, so it wasn't a huge sum of money, but enough to be of real concern. The woman can accept responsibility for her actions, telling her friends that she had lost the coin.

Jesus uses a rhetorical question to start these parables that would cause the listener to raise an eyebrow. "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine..." Is that a real question? Which one of you would risk 99 sheep to find one lost one? I wouldn't. Would you? This is the sort of reason that Walmart budgets for shoplifting – it's not feasible to track down every lost item.

In light of this, what do we see in the parables that went unnoticed before? What if instead of God, we saw ourselves in the shepherd and the woman? What questions does that raise for us? How does it change our expectations of how we are to be and live?

Let's start with the shepherd. There's a video game I played when I was young, Mario party, and one of the challenges in this game is to count the number of moving bob-ombs, with the winner being the one closest to the actual number. I was terrible at it. If I were the shepherd, I would not even notice I was missing anything. Have you ever tried to count 100 moving creatures? And even if I did notice one was missing, I wouldn't take the time to track down that lost sheep. If I were the woman, on the other hand, I would indeed have noticed that I lost the

coin, as I'm much better at counting to ten. I would have looked just as hard as she did. But would I have told all my friends that I lost ten percent of my life savings?

As I'm reading this anew, I'm prompted to ask myself – what have I lost? How hard do I look? And what does it mean to find what I was looking for?

So, what have you lost? This is a tough question. For some, the loss comes in obvious ways, like how the woman lost her coin. The loss of a spouse, of a parent, of a friend, of a job. In this case, we don't even know what to look for after this loss. The searching is the trial – how do we know what to look for when our loss is so difficult to face. In response to trauma, some people lose their sense of home, of safety, of trust. How hard is it to lose those things, let alone commit yourself to finding them again?

For some the loss is a slow slipping away – friendships that have faded, relationships that have degraded, lingering health issues that has changed the way you live. How do we know to look for those things that we didn't realize that we've lost? How do we take stock of our life to stop and count all the sheep?

Even writing this sermon has helped me count those things in my life. While writing this I had to reckon with those things that I maybe am forgetting to count and realized that I have friends in my life who I haven't talked to in way too long. People that I count among my closest, and I haven't heard their voices in months. This coming week, I've decided that I need to make the time to seek them out and catch up with them.

What have you lost? That's what I want you to think about this coming week. Take some time to consider those places where something is missing and seek out that thing that can help you find it again. Some things that are lost are

irreplaceable, but I want to encourage you to look for things to help you through those losses.

Because in both of those parables the end of the story is joy. The joy that comes in finding what was lost, the joy in finding wholeness. While you take this week to search for what was lost, I want you to think about what it would look like to find that thing you're missing. What joy will you find in recovering it? How will you choose to celebrate?

Let us pray...