

South Arm United Church Sermon --- 11 Sept 2022
The Parables of the Lost Sheep & Coin (and Son)
Luke 15:1-10 (Message translation)

Intro: Question/Wonder

1. With a show of hands please, how many of you have heard 1 or more of these parables before? (Thank you, please put your hands down)
2. Again with a show of hands please, have any of you heard a sermon or sermons plural on this passage? (Thank you, please put your hands down). Bear with me please for one final one,
3. Have any of you heard a message that goes something like this, “Jesus is the Great Shepherd who goes after the one/the lost. Each one of us matter to God and is worth pursuing. Indeed, if you were the only creature on earth, Christ still would have come and paid the price on the cross for you”. Anyone heard that one? Yes, me too. And that IS a fantastic message, a Gospel message which Luke himself leads us to --- but is it what the original audience of Jews would have heard?

So here is my question to myself and to you to begin, “Is there anything *else* these parables might be saying to us”? The Lost sheep, coin and though not in our lectionary – the Prodigal/lost son (which makes up a set of 3)?

I want to invite you with me today to question and to wonder – what *else* besides God grace and salvation might we wonder about in this parable?

AJL

There is a Jewish professor of New Testament studies at Vanderbilt University School of Divinity in Nashville, Tennessee who I became aware of last year and think is phenomenal. Her name is Amy Jill Levine. I really like hearing about Jesus from a Jewish woman. I think it’s awesome and we are richer for the insight into Jesus words and actions as a Jew. The bulk of the message today is based on a number of pieces of her work. I turned to commentaries, sermons others had done and did the research on today’s passage to prepare for you today, but I kept coming back to what she has to say across her books and YouTube videos. And so I make no bones about telling you up front, most of the ideas and words today are hers --- and I pass them onto you.

In her book on Jesus’ parables here is some of what she opens with:

“The gospel writers, in their wisdom, left most of the parables as open narratives in order to invite us into engagement with them. Each reader will hear a distinct message and may find that the same parable leaves multiple impressions overtime”.

Reference: Levine, Amy Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014), 1.

- Special note: page numbers quoted here are based on a Kindle edition and may not reflect exactly the page in the printed version

“Religion has been defined as designed to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. We do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting. Therefore, if we hear a parable and think, “I like that” or, worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough”. Reference: Levine, *Short Stories*, 3.

“Parables and the tellers of parables were there to prompt them to see the world in a different way, to challenge, and at times to indict” Levine, *Short Stories*, 4.

So lest we get too comfy with the parables of the lost and found thinking we know this one already – let’s wonder, how might we be confronted and challenged to think differently today?

Setting the Scene

One way I like to look at scripture is as though it were a play unfolding before my eyes. What is the setting and backdrop? Who are the main characters? Who has dialogue and who are there but don’t have speaking parts? What is the plot line, where is there tension and how is it resolved if at all? Imagine the scene unfolding.

We have Pharisees and legal people set against Jesus, sinners and tax collectors. Jesus always has had opposition. No matter what he did, some people just didn’t know what to make of Jesus and were against him.

The plot: The Pharisees and legalists are grumbling at Jesus’ way of being with sinners and tax collectors and that prompts these parables. Parables were part of the Jewish tradition by the way. This was not a medium invented by Jesus although he employs it often enough that we associate him with them.

At first glance we take in the parable and think, that’s nice. I get it. But if we back away from the scene for a moment and really look at what’s happening – it doesn’t make sense at all!

If you have 100 sheep – that’s privilege. There was a sharp divide between the well off and the masses. The masses would have been struggling to get by and would have had few sheep.

If you had 100, would you notice 1 missing?

“Before the search can begin, we need to notice what or who is not there” Levine, *Stories*, 38.

Would you leave 99 to get 1?
Whose watching the 99?

And then when found, an extravagant party is thrown.
Was sheep on the menu?
How much did that cost?

And the lost coin. She goes to great lengths to find the coin.
First of all, a coin is about a day’s wages. She is sitting on 10 days wages. That’s a lot.
She owns a house.
And she calls a community of local women to celebrate with her when the coin is found.
She too let’s acknowledge is a person of some privilege and position in society.
And the party likely cost at least the 1 day’s wage she found.
It’s extravagant.

Who are we in the story? Are we the 99 & 9? Are we the 1 that has been lost?
Are we the legalists who wonder what Jesus is up to?
Or are we the sinners and tax collectors who are drawn to Jesus?

“According to Luke, the narrative’s traditionally called the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the prodigal son are about sinners repenting and God graciously offering forgiveness and reconciliation. Luke misleads by turning the parables into allegory’s. It is unlikely a 1st century Jewish listener would hear the first two parables and conclude that they have something to do with sheep repenting or coins confessing. Sheep eat, sleep, go to the bathroom, produce wool, and give milk---but an awareness of sin or a sense of salvation is not part of ovine nature”. Levine, *Stories*, 29.

Luke offers us the 1st interpretation of these parables – Count on it, angels throw a party over 1 sinner who repents. Count on it, for the 1 who is lost and found there is great celebration.

But, the sheep didn’t sin and the sheep didn’t repent. Neither did the coin (and God doesn’t lose stuff). It was the owners who lost them. So, does the allegory stack up? P.38

“The parable presents a main figure--- the owner, not the sheep---who realises he has lost something of value to him. For him, the missing sheep, whether it is one of 100 or a million, makes the flock incomplete... When was the last time we took stock, or counted up who was present rather than simply counted on their presence? Will we take responsibility for the losing, and what effort will we make to find it or him or her again?” p.44

The second parable sounds the same themes of loss, search, completion, and joy. But there is a subtle shift from the first parable to the second. The guardian of the flock speaks only of 'my sheep, the lost one'. He does not claim responsibility for losing it. The woman mentions 'the one I had lost'; she claims responsibility. We are provoked again. We can celebrate when what we have lost is found, but can we also admit our responsibility in the losing?
P.47-48

Whom have we not counted?

Whom have we overlooked?

Whom have we not invited and made to feel like your voice doesn't count?

The parables invite us to take account and do the counting necessary to ensure we don't lose anything / anyone

Professor Amy-Jill Levine: Provocation, Parables, and Jesus by Token's Show
<https://youtu.be/ZvYi9Z9-OOY>

Though not in our lectionary portion today, we know the 3rd of the parable set is the passage we know as the Prodigal Son. However, the punchline of the prodigal is different than the sheep and coin.

The older son was in the field and hears the party and asks what is going on. And hearing that the party is for his younger brother who has squandered the inheritance and has come home, the older brother refuses to go in and the father comes out to have a discussion with the older son.

They had enough time to get a party together and invite all the guests – but the older brother is now the one missing – out in the field of the estate.
It seems this time, it's the father forgot to count.

Maybe we are to wonder, Whom in my family have I written out, let go and need to be reconciled to?

Or maybe it says we should seek the lost and go to lunch. Break bread and make amends and strengthen the ties that bind.

Or maybe it's really about counting. Do we treasure the already incorporated? The 99, the 9 coins and the one who works hard day in and day out? Or do we spend all our resources on the lost? Who gets the bulk of our attention?

Short Stories with Jesus, 1st Session published by Abingdon Press (with you guessed it, AJ Levine)
<https://youtu.be/XlxpPZvqGdl>

As you can see, the parables are not easy, not comforting. They are meant to challenge us to something.

And so whether you see these parables as a microcosm of the Gospel – God pursues us and celebrates when we come home – or whether you see them as about counting – those who are in and those who are lost or outliers and figuring out our place in the story – I just wonder, what you noticed that was different today?

Who is counted?

How do we treat the already included and the outsider?

Whom and for what occasions do we invite people around our table and celebrate life together?

May we be people who count.

Amen.