

Messiah Moravian Church
September 11, 2022
Proper 19, Year C
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Luke 15:1-10

LOSING, FINDING, REJOICING

Parables provoke us to think differently. They are not finished stories. The person who hears them completes them. Parables invite us to ask, what am I going to do with these characters and events rather than what do they mean.

For me, new insights into Jesus's parables come from this book written by New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine entitled *Short Stories By Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables Of A Controversial Rabbi*. Professor Levine's book altered many of my interpretations and preconceptions about Jesus' parables. She sees his parables in a new light because she's a rarity among New Testament scholars. Professor Levine is Jewish, teaches in a Christian seminary, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, and is an authority on New Testament Greek. She recognizes that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi with extraordinary interpretative skills of the Torah, and she understands the Jewish influences on his teachings. Many Christians tend to forget the importance of Jesus's Jewish heritage.

Christians believe Jesus was much more than a rabbi: He is the Son of God, crucified and raised from the dead, who taught us about God's unfathomable love. But in the minds of the crowds who flocked around him in Galilee and Judea, Jesus was a prophet who knew the scriptures exceptionally well and who had remarkable gifts of healing, much like the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. These crowds did not come to see the Son of God, nor did they suspect that he might be the messiah.

Today's parables are typically perceived as allegories about sinners who have wandered away but then have repented and come back. In an allegory each character in the story symbolizes something or someone else. In the Lost Sheep parable, we usually think of God as the shepherd who discovers that he only has 99 sheep. So he keeps searching until the last sheep (or sinner) is found. In the Lost Coin, God is a woman with ten coins, who realizes she has lost one. She scours her house with her oil lamp to search every nook and cranny until she finds that lost coin. Again, God keeps searching until the lost is found.

These are not faulty interpretations of these stories; indeed, they can be seen as beautiful representations of God's relentless love. Professor Levine says that while these are helpful and lovely readings, it is not likely how a first-century Jew would have heard and interpreted them.

Why might a first century Jewish audience hear and interpret these stories differently? First of all, she says, they are to be read together, including the one about the Prodigal Son, which is not in today's reading. They all have something that is lost. They all, in finding the lost thing, rejoice and celebrate by throwing a big party and inviting their friends to rejoice that the lost is found. These common elements bind all three stories together.

In today's two parables, a sheep owner loses one of his sheep and a housewife loses a coin. Here is a clue that maybe these are not to be read as allegories, for God does not lose us, God does not misplace us. That is why Professor Levine says better titles for these parables might be the "The Inept Sheep Owner" and "The Frantic Housewife."

There's one little detail hiding in these stories that most Christian interpreters overlook, as I did. Once we know it's there, we can never read these parables again without considering it. The main characters in both stories are very wealthy people. The shepherd has a flock of a hundred sheep. No shepherd listening to Jesus' parable would have had anywhere near so many animals. The woman has ten silver coins. Not a single peasant woman in that subsistence society would have owned ten silver coins. Jesus could have framed his parables around a shepherd with three sheep or a householder with two coins, but he doesn't. When his peasant audience hears these parables, it's as if they're learning about "The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous."

His listeners could scarcely believe that a person who owned so much would become frantic over losing so little, relatively speaking. As they understand it, the shepherd seems crazy to leave 99 sheep unattended to go looking for a missing one. If the woman with ten coins is that wealthy, surely she's got servant girls to sweep the house for her. But, despite their wealth, these two pay very close attention to what they've lost.

There's something else about this story that doesn't come out in most conventional interpretations. Many people follow Luke's lead when he moralizes about the joy in heaven for a sinner who repents. But that means they blame the sheep for getting lost. Jesus' listeners knew that sheep, by their nature, wander. But a good shepherd knows that and is therefore vigilant.

As for the woman with the lost coin, it makes absolutely no sense to blame the coin for getting lost. Yet that's what we would be forced to conclude if we accept Luke's interpretation. If the parable is about a heavenly welcome for repentant sinners, then how can a coin repent?

No, Jesus most likely means that both the shepherd and the woman are at fault for losing valuable items. Neither the shepherd nor the householder symbolizes God. They're just two people who lose things. They're almost comical figures, rich misers, who, in spite of all the wealth they possess, turn everything topsy-turvy looking for the one thing they've foolishly lost.

When Jesus began by asking, “Which one of you men, having a hundred sheep...” and, “Which one of you women, having ten silver coins...” before he got any further, his audience must have immediately thought, “Whoa, none of us! We don’t have wealth like that!”

And that’s his point. If these super-wealthy people frantically try to get their property back, then wouldn’t we who have just three sheep do even more to find the one we’ve lost? And wouldn’t we who have just two coins turn our household upside down to find the fifty percent of our life’s savings we’ve lost?

Luke’s version of the parables is about repentance and forgiveness, but as Jesus originally told them, they are more about losing something and then celebrating at finding it once again. And what a celebration it is, far exceeding the value of either one sheep or one coin. To the average first century Jewish peasant, such wildly extravagant celebrations must have seemed sheer wasteful folly.

First century Jews might also hear these stories differently because they already knew that God would never abandon them, even when they committed mistake after mistake. It is the unbroken thread in the Torah: God loves his people even when they build a Golden Calf, when they beg to return to Egypt, when they demand an earthly king like the other nations, when they mistreat the vulnerable stranger, child or widow. Again and again God reaches out in love and forgiveness. Again and again, WE who have lost God find him with us and rejoice in his presence.

Perhaps these parables were meant to provoke us into considering what else we have lost: maybe it’s money that disappeared in a bad investment; possessions destroyed by human or natural forces; dreams lost amidst the daily grind of life; good health taken for granted and now no longer so good; the passing of loved ones.

Most of us try to put a good face on the circumstances of our lives by thinking positively and hoping for the best. Yet our lives are marked by loss of one sort or another. None of us gets a free pass, not even a guy with a hundred sheep or a housewife with a small fortune in silver. But even as we seek to recover those losses, we can be assured that God is here with us.

So much of living well is learning to embrace our losses by loving the good things life gives for as long as we have them and by realizing we never completely possess them. This may get a little easier as we age and come to see that everything dear to us, even life itself, is just on loan to us.