

The Lost and Found Department
 Luke 15:1-10
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As promised last week, today we begin looking at parables that teach us either what the kingdom of God is like, or what our responsibility is ó as God's hands and feet in the world ó to help usher in that kingdom. Just as with the parable of the mustard seed that we talked about last week ó the answers aren't easy, and quite often they are not what we expect.

So, let's begin with a question. What have you lost most recently? Some days I wonder if it's my mind!! Seriously, what have you lost? And what did you do to find it? As a society, we spend a lot of time and money protecting our valuables and avoiding being lost, don't we? We insure the things that are important to us, we place microchips in our pets ó before those were invented, how many of you spent hours driving through the neighborhood looking for your lost dog or cat? We have GPS on our phones so we don't get lost, and we have an Amber Alert system to help us locate lost children quickly.ⁱ We go to great lengths to hold on to our things or to recover them when they are lost.

That happens in today's stories too ó the shepherd and the woman go to great lengths to recover the lost sheep and the lost coin and then they host celebrations that border on the absurd. Let's take a closer look.

When today's passage opens, Jesus is in hot water again. Just before this, a leader of the Pharisees invited Jesus to dinner on the Sabbath. When he arrived, Jesus noted who else was there, and how the other guests were jockeying for places of honor at the dinner table. The most important guests sat closest to the host, and the least important sat farthest away. Anybody who was anybody sat near the head of the table. So Jesus tells two stories ó two parables. The first is about humility ó choose the lowest place at the table and let the host elevate you if he chooses instead of choosing a prime seat and getting busted to the back. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted," Jesus says. Then he tells his host, when you give a dinner party like this, don't invite your friends and

brothers and rich neighbors, hoping you'll get repaid with a similar invitation. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind ó then you will be blessed and repaid at the resurrection.

Jesus isn't a model dinner guest so far is he? He has already criticized both the host and his fellow guests. He must not have been paying attention the night they taught dinner etiquette at Cotillion class. If that weren't enough ó he then tells the parable of the great dinner where none of the invited guests come and the slaves are sent out into the streets to invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. I don't imagine that this story sat well either.

That brings us to today's passage. The tax collectors and sinners are coming near to listen to Jesus. And where were the scribes and Pharisees? They're present too, and they are grumbling. (PAUSE) We're church people, we know about grumbling, don't we? The Pharisees are grumbling about Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them. The two parables we just heard, as well as the story we call the prodigal son, are widely understood as Jesus's response to the criticism from the grumblers.

Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. The word "welcome" here implies hospitality ó this time Jesus is the host, not the guest, and he invites sinners to his table for a meal. Why would this be a problem for the Pharisees? Pharisees weren't bad people ó although we often make that assumption. All Jews were supposed to observe purity laws ó even Jesus ó and the Pharisees were very serious about this duty. The code included keeping oneself separate from those who were unclean. The Pharisees were also considered the most expert and accurate interpreters of Jewish law. They respected the ancestral traditions and were cautious or suspicious about change. We can relate to that if we're honest. As we've moved through our visioning process, lots of folks have said, "I know we need to change, but..." (PAUSE)

So back to the scribes and Pharisees, they, along with the sinners and tax collectors, are the original hearers of these stories. (PAUSE)

Like Shakespearean plays, parables have multiple layers of meaning. On the surface, the meaning of these two stories is clear. If you are lost, Jesus ó represented by the shepherd and the woman - will

come and find you, and there will be great joy and rejoicing over those that repent ó more rejoicing in fact than over the 99 who need no repentance. (PAUSE)

Even at the surface level, the Pharisees are not happy with this story. Why? Because most scholars believe they identify with the 99 who do not need repentance. It's a snub that Jesus would turn his back on them to go and search for one who is lost. It's an insult to the Pharisees that God would rejoice more over one sinner who repents than 99 who remain faithful, or that the woman would rejoice over one coin that has been found.

But if we look beneath the surface, there is more at play here, and the story begins to raise more questions than answers. Business folks, let's look at these stories from a practical perspective. In many ways ó leaving 99 to go after 1 is a senseless risk, isn't it? Many of us would consider a 1% loss perfectly acceptable ó if you recruit 100 college students and 99 graduate that's pretty amazing right? The USDA reports that in the grocery business, the loss rate for produce is about 11.5 percent. It's part of the cost of doing business. Besides, when the shepherd leaves the flock to go after one, isn't he risking the 99 who will be left alone? This does not make any sense does it? (PAUSE) Unless you're the one who's lost. (PAUSE) Do all the sheep matter? Of course they do. But the shepherd is investing his time and energy in the one who needs him at the moment. Do all lives matter? Of course they do. But over the last few years it has been our Asian and Black brothers and sisters whose lives have been disproportionately at risk, they are the ones, for now, that require extra care.

The other thing that doesn't make sense about this story is the level of celebration over the recovery of the lost sheep and lost coin. Both the shepherd and the woman invite their friends and neighbors over for a big party. Isn't this a bit much? Did the woman spend more on the celebration than she gained by finding her lost coin? And here is something I'd never seen in this story until this week. Where did the shepherd go to celebrate after he found his lost sheep? The text tells us he went home ó not back to the rest of the flock. If the 99 represent the Pharisees in the passage, Jesus the shepherd has left them out in the wilderness where they remain vulnerable, and he has gone home to party without them. A

great reversal has occurred here, the Pharisees have, in essence, traded places with the one who was lost. Now the lost sheep is at the center of the celebration, and the 99 are outside, left to fend for themselves. Raj Nadella notes, the Scribes and the Pharisees are used to being the "in crowd," and they have been actively excluding groups like the "sinners" and tax collectors from full participation in the community. They benefit from the comfort and security their place affords, while denying the same to others.ⁱⁱ But no more, says Jesus. Not only is he inviting the sinners and tax collectors to dinner, they are the guests of honor. Not only are they the guests of honor, the party is as full of as much joy and rejoicing as you'll find anywhere.

This interpretation of these parables resonates with me in many ways, and we need to pay attention to what they can teach us as individuals and a congregation. Who do we exclude and why? Who would we rather the shepherd not seek, find and celebrate over? These are worthy questions that deserve our time and reflection. But there are other important ways to look at these stories.

New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine draws much of the scholarship that informs this interpretation into question. Dr. Levine is Jewish, and she brings her wealth of experience about Jewish culture and religion to bear on the study of the New Testament. She regularly calls our Christian assumptions into question and helps us see how anti-Semitic many of those assumptions are.

In these two stories, she points out that sheep and coins can't repent, so why would Jesus tag the stories with this interpretation? Further, she notes, it's not the sheep or the coin's fault that they got lost in the first place. Practically speaking, it is the shepherd's responsibility to keep the entire flock safe and the woman's responsibility to keep track of her money. Therefore, according to Levine, the shepherd and the woman cannot represent God in these stories ó for God never loses us. She suggests that these two stories would be better titled the Shepherd who Lost his Sheep and the Woman who Lost her Coin.

Levine also notes that there are no outcasts in these stories. She believes that in Jesus' day, sinners and tax collectors were not outcasts ó they had not abandoned the law or denied the covenant. Sinners were welcome in the synagogues and in the temple where repentance was encouraged. In the first century,

the term often referred to those who looked to themselves rather than worked for the good of the community. Further she notes, tax collectors were viewed negatively because they worked for Rome ó they were seen more as traitors than those who had abandoned the law.

Levine also observes that the shepherd did not expel the sheep for eating non-kosher grass, the sheep did not sin or need to repent. The shepherd was the responsible one who lost his sheep. Similarly, the coin was not cast out; the woman was looking for her money, not trying to divest herself of it.ⁱⁱⁱ For Levine, the premise that these parables are about repentance just doesn't hold water. (PAUSE) What is it about then?

The parable of the lost sheep also occurs in the book of Matthew where Jesus is teaching his disciples ó not sinners, tax collectors, Pharisees and scribes. Here is how the story reads there: "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away ó or becomes deceived, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

Here, as in Luke, the shepherd, and the woman, stand for exactly what they are ó those who are responsible for things that have been entrusted to them. And why is it such a big problem when one out of a hundred goes missing? Because they belonged to the flock to start with, and the family is not complete without them. (PAUSE) And, what's the first step to recovering sheep and coins that are lost? Realizing that they are gone in the first place.

So friends, let's take stock this morning. Who is missing from our fold? Of course, unlike sheep, people have agency ó we have the free will to come and go as we please. We don't lose people in the strictest sense. But a number of those we love have wandered off ó some due to the pandemic and some for other reasons. What would it mean for us to be like the shepherd and the woman in the parables ó to make finding and restoring those who are lost our top priority? Instead of guilt-tripping those who are gone or shaming them for their absence, what if we just partied like crazy when they came home? These stories

raise lots of questions for us, but here is one thing I know for sure. All of heaven will rejoice with us when even just one is found.

ⁱ Christopher Edmonston, Homiletical Perspective, Feasting on the Gospels, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 83

ⁱⁱ Raj Nadella, Exegetical Perspective, , Feasting on the Gospels, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 85.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amy Jill Levine, Short Stories by Jesus, New York: Harper Collins, 2014, p.33.