

**Sermon: The Things We Lose**

**Scripture: Luke 15:1-10**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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The Jewish scholar and professor, Amy-Jill Levine, helps Christians look with new - and often more open - eyes at the Jewish context of the New Testament scriptures, often challenging our presumptions and especially our tendencies to interpret in ways that set Jews or Jewishness over and against Jesus. She helps us place Jesus in his very Jewish context, for he was a Jew after all, and if one's eyes are open it's obvious that Jesus lived and taught in a Jewish landscape and from a Jewish perspective. Our two scriptures this morning are evidence of that: Jesus' parable comes directly out of the prophet Ezekiel's writings showing God as a loving shepherd. It's not as if Jesus was saying something radical that his predecessors hadn't, nor that the Jews presented God as wrathful and vindictive and Jesus presented him as loving. Across the ages such suggestions have fostered anti-semitic sentiment among Christians and we must be careful of it even today.

So Professor Levine does a remarkable job of placing Jesus in context as a Rabbi doing what Rabbi's did for his time and place and one of the ways that Rabbis taught was with the use of parables; small stories often with a multitude of meanings meant to force the listener to pay attention to the hidden aspects of our own values, assumptions, and lives. Dr. Levine says parables are designed to challenge the listener and make them uncomfortable, so much so, she says, that if we hear one of

Jesus' parables and think "I really like that" then we are likely not listening well enough.

We miss the power of parables if we jump too quickly to allegorized or moralized explanations – it means “be nice like the Good Samaritan” or “be smart with your money like the faithful steward” or “forgive like the prodigal son’s father or don’t be like his resentful brother”. But in fact parables are designed to have many angles of approach to shake us up, leave us unsettled, maybe even indict us. This, she explains, is how the genre of parables has always operated throughout Israel’s history (in “Short Stories by Jesus”, pp. 3-4).

So a good starting point when hearing Jesus’ parables as we’ll do on a number of upcoming Sunday is to say not so much “what does it mean” but how does this strike me? Where does this little story unsettle me? A good example of this is how unsettling it is to many of us at the end of the Prodigal Son when the older brother stands in the field resenting his father for celebrating his brother’s return. Yes it’s about the forgiving father and the repentant son but if it’s the older brother that makes us uncomfortable, within whom we can see some of our own shadow, then that there is where the parable’s powder keg sits.

And it’s there in the Gospel of Luke that these two little parables that Michelle just read surface, right before the parable of the Prodigal Son; the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. Jesus tells these parables in response to the Pharisees expressing discomfort with Jesus eating and cavorting with sinners and tax collectors.

Our temptation is to judge those hard-hearted legalistic Pharisaic Jews when we interpret our Christian scriptures, but as Professor

Levine explains, we have to realize that the Pharisees were highly respected, good, merciful people who most of us would like. They're troubled by who Jesus is hanging with and we would be too. The catch phrase "sinners and tax collectors" would be the equivalent in our own day to drug dealers or arms dealers, or inside traders, overt racists or sexual predators; people that we would feel were really not very good people. This doesn't mean, obviously, that Jesus condoned their behaviors but he apparently didn't avoid, dismiss or reject them either. Jesus always seemed to be up for a good time, whoever it was with; remember at one point he is labeled by decent folk as a glutton and drunkard!

So it's to the grumbling likes of us that Jesus tells his parables. He says, "which one of you, having 100 sheep and losing one would not leave the other 99 and run off into the wilderness to find the one?" The answer that everyone around him would have given is "none of us would!" None of us would leave 99 sheep untended to find one sheep who was irresponsible enough in the first place to get separated from the flock!

But Jesus' parable continues: "and upon finding them wouldn't you throw him over your shoulder to bring him back home?" You mean throw a full-grown sheep over your shoulder and carry him on your own back? No, if anything, I might smack his rump or yell at him so that he knows how unhappy I am with having to go out of my way, putting everyone else at risk, for his trouble!

"And once you got back," Jesus continues, "wouldn't you invite all your friends over and throw a party for the return of that one sheep that

you carried on your back from the wilderness?” “No, most decidedly not”, everyone around Jesus would have said, “NO!” Are you crazy? There are 99 others. This would have been an annoyance, not a delight!

But Jesus offers another parable despite the discomfort and confusion of the crowd – “Or if you lost one silver coin among your ten wouldn’t you sweep your house until you found it?” Ok, yes, now we’re with you Jesus. “And then gather all your friends and throw a lavish party to celebrate its discovery...” what and spend as much money on a party as the silver coin was worth in the first place? Well, no, there we go again!

It’s a parable, remember, and so it should be a bit baffling, no single meaning, and we should ask in reading it; what’s the torque, where’s the edge, how does it disturb my assumptions and trouble my convictions and chasten me toward more faithful living? Yes, of course it does mean that God is a loving Shepherd God that seeks out the lost and that’s one beautiful and critical interpretation but where’s the hook or the edge for you that leaves you unsettled... cause there’s power in a parable if we allow it to work on us!

I don’t know how they might work on you this morning but I’ve had some time this week to allow them to work on me personally and I’ll share two ways beyond the obvious that these parables gnawed at me, two entry points into my own life, two barbs that hook me and lead me like the Pharisees to grumble at Jesus bein’ all... Jesus-Y!

First of all, I get irritable when I lose things. When something is lost one of my first thoughts at least when our house was full of children was what did someone do with it?! I’m sure it was right here on this

table! In fact because Tracy does the majority of the cleaning in the house, the girls and I often find ourselves convinced that she is the culprit for lost things! Rarely is that actually the truth, but we don't learn very fast and it sure is nice to have someone to blame. To be fair she does have this incredible knack for finding the things we've lost though it wasn't her fault, which then only reinforces our grumbling to her.

But then if it's not to her, I'll turn it on myself get all grumbly about the inconvenience of it all and how I don't have time to be looking for my keys or my phone and how distracted can I be?! What an idiot! Am I having memory issues? What the heck, Will?! Ugh! And when I find whatever I lost my mood does change, I do feel a somewhat better, but also embarrassed that I was so irritable (and they were in my pocket the whole time!) and no, I'm not much interested in throwing a party!

So I'm aware that in the warp and weft of my daily life too much of what I experience comes as an obstacle to how I'VE decided my day should be going and what I NEED to be getting done and how things are SUPPOSED to go. Such small and not so small expectations can rule my life... and ruin moments of it. You know, it's something of John Lennon's quote "Life is what happens to you while your busy making other plans... or looking for your iPhone!" To have the presence of mind to see whatever distraction or obstacle or challenge not as oppressing me and my plans but as part of life's living that is to be met with faithful attentiveness, even when looking for lost things. Joy can enter in, when full attention has been given to what life brings us, regardless of our expectations. Something less than joy, maybe even resentment, follows

from the belief that this shouldn't have happened or that it was a distraction or NOT a part of my plan! In other words I myself can get too easily lost and need to allow myself to be found.

Secondly, if Jesus reveals to us that God is a gracious Shepherd King who pursues us in our waywardness, how must I take particular note of who is lost among and around me and place my attention on the least of these, to maybe the most irritating of these, to even those who make me unhappy or uncomfortable. Who are those in our circles who we might not even notice are missing on some level or another and how do we tend to even the most... or especially the most... marginal of those people in our families, in our church communities, in our towns, not, again, as though they are side-track or distraction but actually the heart of where our attention should be. If this is the Shepherd God's movement in the world – seeking out the lost - then to allow God's presence to flow in and through us we too must tend to the margins, to those on the outs, to those we don't have time for, to those who we might not even realize are lost.

I imagine the invitation is there somewhere in your life, right now, God's Spirit nudging – where is she? what about him? It's easier without him but then we are not complete? They make us uncomfortable which is exactly why they need to be here... and so on and so forth.

We offer a quiet time of reflection after we preach as an invitation to take something you've heard in scripture or in something Judy or I have said and just mull it over for a moment before racing on to the next element of worship. That's at least the idea. In this quiet time I'd invite

you to consider who or what is lost in your life and needs your attention. Is it someone or something that you're keeping just this side of your awareness cause it makes you edgy or uncomfortable? Ask God to show you where that sheep is and how you might find that coin...