

March 31, 2019  
Fourth Sunday in Lent  
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Joshua 5:9-12  
Psalm 32  
2 Corinthians 5:16-21  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

When we hear that parable, it can be hard to land on a particular character upon which to focus. All three characters speak to us, each in his own way. Alternately or even simultaneously, we are: the wayward younger child who never quite manages to make it home; the parent who lacks such an expansive capacity to forgive; the bitter older child who can't let go of old grudges and resentments. Each character speaks in his own way, but we hear them saying the same thing: that we fail to measure up.

Parables are fictions meant to illustrate. They tend to be exaggerated and even hyperbolic, and therefore they don't align neatly with real life. Through parables, Jesus attempts to describe the person and purpose of God; for God, even the most exaggerated language is inadequately expansive. This doesn't mean we should take parables less seriously, but it does suggest that we should be cautious about measuring ourselves on their exaggerated scale, one against which we will surely fail. God's yardstick is very different from ours. Therefore perhaps we humans should avoid measuring ourselves or others. If we measure less, we might find ourselves being kinder to ourselves, and kinder to others. If we measure less, maybe we can just accept the fact of God's extravagant love.

That being said, let's back up and note something: between the Pharisees saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them," and this parable, there's a gap filled with two other short parables, the ones about the lost sheep and the lost coin. The three parables are more powerful as a body, so let's hear the other two:

[Jesus] told them this parable: "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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 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.' 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.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 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.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."<sup>1</sup>

Those two parables lead to the following Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother. Hearing them together helps clarify their shared themes of loss and return, of joy and rejoicing.

Along those lines, one author describes the Parable of the Prodigal this way:

Behind Jesus' parable lies profound and overwhelming truth about God and God's kingdom. We humans, we all were lost, mired in sins of sensuality and greed and self-referential resentment, hip-deep in the pig slop of envy. Before we knew it, God reached out in the people Israel and then in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. God raised us up and called us home. It is just not about you or me, or my sin or your sin, or my deserts or your deserts. It is about God and God's life-giving love and mercy. Every time God's active, stretching, searching, healing love finds someone and calls that person back home, it does not mean there is less for the rest of us. It means there is more. More wine. More feasting. More music. More dancing. It means another, and now a bigger, party.<sup>2</sup>

I try to be careful about using the language of sin—not because I fail to take sin seriously, but because that language is so often weaponized. So let me add that we sometimes describe sin as separation from God. Sometimes we are separated from God by the actions of others, and sometimes those others represent the church and presume to speak for God. If sin is simply separation from God, then repentance is simply return—return from wherever we have been. We get lost, God finds us, we return, and God rejoices. We need do nothing else, except join the party.

All that being said, let's consider another perspective on these parables. A couple of weeks ago, *The Christian Century* magazine featured an interview with noted New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine. A professor at Vanderbilt and author of many scholarly books and essays, Levine is unusual among New Testament scholars in that she's a practicing Orthodox Jew. When asked how she, as a Jewish woman, was drawn to New Testament scholarship, Levine replied:

I think Jesus is fascinating. Plus he's Jewish, so he's one of ours. The more I read not only the words attributed to him but also the stories told about him, the more intriguing I find the material.

I also have very much worried about the anti-Jewish views that frequently surface in studies about Jesus. A number of Christian commentators feel the need to make Judaism look bad in order to make Jesus look good. Instead of portraying Jesus as a Jew talking to other Jews, he becomes in their views the first Christian, the one who invented divine grace, mercy, and love, and all that other good stuff. Such views neglect the presence of these same virtues within Jesus' own Jewish context. There should be no reason this Jewish Jesus is used to promote anti-Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

Levine has recently branched out into children's books. Along with Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, a professor of religious studies and rabbi, Levine authored a children's book about the three parables we're considering today. It's titled *Who Counts?: 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, and 2 Sons*. In the book, Levine and Sasso include a note to parents and educators, in which they offer this:

A parable is a simple story that asks us to think about very important matters: our relationships with others, our place in the world, and how we can be better people.

...

When the church was separating itself from Judaism, some Christian interpreters erroneously explained these stories as indicating the difference between the “stern” and “angry” God of the Jews and the “forgiving” and “merciful” God of the Christians. That is not what the original stories were designed to do. God in both traditions is merciful and forgiving. Jesus was a Jewish teacher, and he, along with his fellow Jews, viewed God as loving.

The Christian tradition has sometimes understood the parables to be allegories. It made connections between details in the parables and people or events in the world. For example, the sheep, the coin, and the prodigal son represent repenting sinners; the man who seeks the lost sheep and the father who welcomes the prodigal son are symbols for God. Ironically, the tradition less often sees the woman who seeks her coin as a symbol for God.

Our presentation of these parables does not intend to erase the focus on repenting and forgiving. Rather, we seek to add a new understanding based on what we imagine Jesus’ original audiences would have heard. That audience would not think that the man who lost his sheep, the woman who lost her coin, or the father who lost his older son were symbols for God. This is because God doesn’t lose us. Nor would they think of the sheep and the coin as examples of repenting, because sheep and coins don’t repent.

In our reading the three stories are connected. The first two stories set up the third. The main message is about counting, watching for what is missing, and celebrating becoming whole again.

The shepherd counts the sheep; that is the only way he would know one is missing. The woman counts the coins so that she is aware when one has been lost. Finally, the father realizes that although his younger son has returned, he has lost his older son. The sheep is returned, and the coin is found. Whether the older son will recognize his father’s love remains an open question.

When we read parables, we should ask ourselves: Where am I in this story? How am I like the man who lost his sheep, the woman who lost her coin, the father who feels he has lost both his sons? Do I ever feel like the lost one? How am I like the younger brother who does not want to stay home? How am I like the older brother who does everything his father tells him but who does not feel that he is loved?

The parable then prompts other questions: Have I lost something, or someone, and not paid attention? Is there someone I take for granted? What, or whom, have I forgotten to count?

If we take these questions seriously and act on them, we are better able to love our neighbors as ourselves....<sup>4</sup>

Christianity has its roots in Judaism. Very often, anti-Semitism has its roots in Christianity. The Passion of the Gospel of John, which we hear on Good Friday, is especially problematic. This is important to remember as we approach Holy Week.

However, we look at the Parable of the Prodigal, it's about love. I'll give the last word to our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, who talks a lot about love. Regarding the Parable of the Prodigal He offers this:

As the story unfolds, it is clear that the parable is more about the determined, compassionate, infinite providence of God than it is about the ways of God's prodigal children. In the end, this parable points to the great embrace and deep expansive love, compassion, and justice of God, deeper, wider, and higher than our imaginings.<sup>5</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Luke 15:3-10, NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Rodney Clapp, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide, "Pastoral Perspective" (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, from an interview with Elizabeth Palmer, "Knowing and preaching the Jewish Jesus," *The Christian Century*, March 13, 2019, available at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/knowning-and-preaching-jewish-jesus> (accessed March 30, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, "An Note to Parents and Teachers" from *Who Counts?: 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, and 2 Sons*, illustrated by Margaux Meganck (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Curry, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide, "Homiletical Perspective" (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).