Your Bias is Showing

A Meditation on Luke 15: 1 – 32

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Sometimes we catch gospel writers with their biases showing…today is one of those days. Luke offers us three stories in succession and, in case we were wondering, explains them to us. He tells us that they are about repentance and forgiveness. Are they? Or is that what Luke wants us to find in them?

Luke sets up what we know as chapter 15 by saying that the Pharisees and legal experts, members of the crowd gathered that day, are unhappy that Jesus eats with sinners. Then Luke, rather abruptly, offers us three parables: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost family.

At the conclusion of each of the first two – the finding of the wayward sheep, the finding of the missing coin, Luke tags on a line about the rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who has changed their heart and life. The funny thing is a sheep doesn’t really sin, nor can it repent. And a coin? Even less chances of that. Both of them can be lost, but it isn’t *their* fault. The losing is more a problem of poor shepherding, or messy housekeeping. What if we look at these parables separate from what Luke had to say about them? I wonder if we will come closer to what Jesus had to say?

In her fascinating book on the parables, *Short Stories by Jesus*, A.J. Levine, points out this disconnect between what Luke wants the theme of these parables to be and what it truly is. She reminds us that Matthew, who also tells the story of the lost sheep, gives the story a very different context. We should acknowledge that it is entirely possible that Jesus would have repeated parables to different audiences. Let’s assume that he would have done this – any good storyteller would. But let’s look at how Matthew uses the parable of the lost sheep as found in chapter 18: 10 – 14.

Jesus has been asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And he responds by inviting a child to stand among them and urging them all to be as humble as a child. He then continues

***10****“Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.****12****What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?****13****And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.****14****So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. (CEB)*

In Luke, the shepherd has lost one sheep, which seems to imply it is the shepherd’s fault. In Matthew, the sheep has *gone astray*. In the Greek, Levine reminds us, the language is stronger than simply *going astray*. That little lamb has been deceived, led away from the truth, led into error. For Matthew, this parable is about caring for the community of believers, ensuring that none are “led astray” by false teachings, by deceptions that may cause them harm.

This context makes more sense to me. Jesus reminds them of the vulnerability of children and their responsibility to care for children. Matthew then expands it to remind them to care for the vulnerable among them. So what do we do with Luke’s interpretation? Did Luke get sleepy and doze off while writing, and then, forget where he was in the text? There’s nothing about sinning in these first two parables. And if we make God the shepherd and the woman, then it seems we have a God who is very careless about keeping up with the ones they love? And that sounds like terrible theology!

The idea of a God who drops everything to come and find us when we are lost, that fills my soul with hope. But we can’t really have the finding without the losing! What if these two parables are to remind us of those *we* lose? What if these stories are the urgent reminder of *our* responsibility as a community to provide care, to provide shelter, to provide sustenance? Whom has the church – and I use church in the broadest sense here – lost? And the question behind that is, “have we even been paying attention?” A shepherd responsible for 100 sheep has to be keenly aware to notice that *one* is missing. A pile of coins could be 10 or 12 or 9…will you know unless you count them? Sadly, it seems the church has been paying attention, but not eager to respond to the crisis. We hear the numbers about the “nones,” those who profess no faith, and the “dones,” those who are “done with church,” but have we listened to why people slip quietly away?

There are a million reasons to leave church – there are those who have been so badly abused by the church that they don’t want to have anything to do with it. They have heard too many messages that exclude them or exclude those they love. There are those who have been abused by those within the church whom they had been told were trustworthy, one of the cruelest abuses of all. There are others who see no relevance in what is being taught, who have been wounded by our misinterpretations of scripture. And there are those who wonder where the faithful are when the world is in crisis. These two tiny parables pack quite a power when we strip away the moral that Luke has given them, turn them on ourselves and ask, “who is missing?” “To whom do I need to be listening?”

We have no idea if Jesus told these three stories together as Luke does. If Jesus did, he was challenging his listeners to consider the many ways we are lost to one another. One thread woven through these parables is a call to self-awareness. “Have I noticed who is missing?” “Whom have I hurt?” “Do I need to forgive myself, ask forgiveness of others, extend forgiveness to others?” He also seems to be saying that being found isn’t necessarily contingent upon repenting. Sometimes the finding, the reuniting comes first. The forgiveness takes time. The awareness of the need for forgiveness takes time.

As with the first two stories, this much fuller tale, the tale of a younger son who leaves home and an older son who stays behind, carries the theme of losing, finding, restoring, rejoicing. But this is a heavier story, for at the end, the father and his older son are not at the party but standing outside. We are left not knowing if the older son will cross the threshold and join the celebration.

This story is a story of a parent who loses two sons, and once again we have to be careful about assigning the role of God to the father in the story. We can and should believe that God is like the father who blesses us as we leave home to explore the world on our own, watching hopefully every day for our return. God longs for our presence, longs for our companionship. But we should also grieve over a father who does not see that the son who stays beside him is equally lost, unsure of his place in the family, unsure that he is valued, convinced that no one believes he is worthy of a feast. God is *not* that parent. God is not that unaware, and God urges us to be equally attuned to the ways that we unintentionally devalue others.

The younger son, coming to himself amidst the pigs he was tending, realizes that what he has lost is community. Though he willingly spent his money on others, they all walked when the money ran out. Wherever he is living does not have the same sense of responsibility for the foreigner in their midst. Whether or not he realizes he has hurt his father, hurt his older brother, remains unclear. He develops a plan for how he can be reunited, but is there remorse? We don’t know, nor does the father demand it of him upon his return. In this aspect of the father we do witness the vastness of God’s embrace, welcoming us with all our flaws on display.

These parables, in addition to the images of hope contained within them, challenge us to explore the messages we have laid upon all of God’s Word. Luke put his spin on the stories. Matthew did, too. Luke was proclaiming repentance and forgiveness. Matthew was advising the community against false teachings. There is nothing wrong with preaching repentance and forgiveness. Nothing wrong with urging caution to a faith community. Sometimes we need to hear a particular message, but I hope we can ask ourselves what particular biases we bring to the text. God wants us to meet the Word with all those critical thinking skills we learned in school. You are all theologians be your very nature. Don’t doubt your own voice when you read something in the scriptures that makes you ask questions. That’s exactly what the text should do! That is also the beauty of working with the text together. You can point out my bias, and maybe I can do the same for you. Together we can find the startling relevance and healing that are contained within God’s Word.

This side of heaven, we will not find completeness. The one missing sheep will not always be carried back to the fold. The one missing coin will not be returned to the jar. The two missing sons may not be united as a family, but we can labor with that hope. We can labor with God’s dream of wholeness. With that as our guiding awareness, just imagine what might be possible. Thanks be to the God of enormous hopes and dreams, the God who loves us more than we can ever know or understand. Amen.

Sources consulted:

Short Stories by Jesus, A.J. Levine, Harper One Publishing

The Power of Parable, John Dominic Crossan, Harper One Publishing

Left Behind and Loving It blogspot

Talk Back meeting of Grace Presbyterian