

May 5            Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son

Luke 15:8-32

I have recently read something by Amy-Jill Levine, Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. She has been striving to understand how Jesus' original listeners, the disciples and others, would have heard his parables. For two thousand years Christians have been interpreting these stories and their words have become so imbedded in our thinking so as to have become normative. Yet, many of these interpretations, while valid and important for us, would not have been how the people who first heard Jesus would have understood them. They were not Christians who believe Jesus is the Son of God who rose from the dead and many of our interpretations come from that basis of fact. They were Jews listening to a Jewish teacher and so would have understood these stories in a much different way.

Luke puts three stories about loss together. We have the story of the lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. We usually hear these parables as being about human sin and repentance and God's forgiveness. This interpretation turns the parables into allegories. We start assigning identities to the participants and once you know what each person represents then you understand the meaning of the parable. This isn't how a first-century audience would have heard them. Parables should not need outside answer keys to help us interpret them.

We have time to look at two of these parables about loss today. We will begin with the woman who loses a coin. The fact that she expends so much effort to find one lost drachma probably indicates that she was poor. A drachma is barely enough to sustain a household for a day. She lights a lamp because Palestinian houses were notoriously dim. The floor may be of dirt or stone. The woman searches every corner until she finds the missing coin. The listener feels the extent, care and urgency of the search. When she finds the coin she invites her friends to rejoice with her. Jesus draws a lesson from the parable explaining that the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents. For Luke repentance is a twofold action, a turning away from the brokenness of sin and a turning toward God.

To appreciate what the people who first heard it might have gotten from this parable we need to recall its context. The religious leaders of that day had been grumbling because Jesus ate with and hung out with tax collectors and other sinners. These people were the lost coin. Jesus was saying God is searching for them. This was not always how God had been depicted. There was more a sense of the angry God punishing the sinner instead of seeking for them. Jesus was saying by his actions, eating with and touching sinners, that God came to seek the lost. But there was also a challenge to those who were lost. It was a reminder to the tax collectors and other sinners that though God is searching for them they must repent. Their role is not passive. Yes, God is seeking them out but there is no celebration in heaven until they accept God's love, grace and forgiveness through repentance.

So through this parable the people of Jesus' day and today are reminded of the commission from God to search for the lost, to welcome them wherever they are in their life journey and to celebrate when they repent. Deep change cannot happen until you are willing to engage with another. This is a parable justifying Jesus' actions and challenging the norms of his day.

The parable of the lost boy can also be looked at in a new light when we remove some of the allegorical baggage. Since it begins there was a man who had two sons we should pay attention to the father and the older brother as well as to the prodigal. All three are connected by having basically the same outline: something is lost, there is a search, the lost item is found, and there is a celebration. In the Bible, there are often stories of a man with two sons. Adam had Cain and Abel; Abraham had Ishmael and Isaac; and Isaac had Esau and Jacob. We know the plot line. We expect the older son to engage in evil or stupid actions and we expect the younger son to emerge as clever, righteous, responsible, and the appropriate successor to his father. This is what the listeners of Jesus was expecting. That the younger son is the prodigal is the first surprise.

If we move beyond the allegory where we see the father as God the parable becomes about what we do when one is experiencing loss. Then you have a father who has lost a son. A son who has lost his way. A brother who has lost his feelings of

entitlement. We can begin to identify with each person in the story. All of us have had those people we care about who become lost to us. There are angry words causing the pain of separation. We make a stupid mistake and they choose not to be around us. We get busy and don't work on the relationship and then find out they have gone on to other friends. We, like the father, desire the relationship to be restored but sometimes it is beyond our power to do anything. We have all been like the son and made choices that caused us to be in a place we would wish not to be. We realize changes need to happen if we are to find our way home. And we have been like the older brother and felt underappreciated, used by others and known the feelings of resentment when another seems to get all the praise. We don't need to allegorize the story to begin to identify with the participants and to gain some insights. We can also think about the neighbors invited to the party. Do you celebrate the joy of a lost one being found or is that condoning poor choices? What about the slave who tells the older brother about the party. How do you share news with another when they might not want to hear it?

With all of these various themes, with whom do you identify at this moment in the parable? Is it the father with the emptiness of loss, the younger son with the feelings of regret, the older brother with wounded pride, the neighbors having to come to terms with their feelings about another's behavior or the slave who is in the middle of a drama that they didn't choose?

Jesus is asking his listeners, what does it mean to be found in each situation? For the father, love and forgiveness is required to heal the lostness or brokenness between him and his son. For the son, repentance is required which means admitting that poor choices had been made and a desire to turn toward home. For the older brother, it is a relinquishment of pride. But for each of the three, the feelings of loss can be overcome. God is at work to heal the separation. God celebrates when lost things are found and asks us to celebrate as well. This is a story about apologies and reconciliation.

So where does this leave us. It is a reminder that being lost, getting lost or feeling lost is a part of life. We can't escape it. We might be the cause of the lost feelings or it might just happen to us. We are to hear that God is at work in the situation, working at

bringing restoration. We are called to do our part so that reconciliation is possible. It may mean repentance, or offering forgiveness or celebrating another's grace filled moment. Jesus wants us to identify where we are lost and ask what we need to do to change.

These three stories ask us to celebrate when the lost is found. We are reminded that God celebrates whenever the lost is found. If we are faithful followers of Christ, we too are asked to join the party. The last parable leaves the older brother outside. We are invited to decide what he does. Will he rejoice and join the party or will he stay outside angry that grace has happened. It makes us ask about our responses. For often we of faith are just like him. But sometimes we also are the prodigal who needs someone to rejoice with us after we have acknowledged bad choices and turned for home. And sometimes we are the father who is filled with joy because the chance at reconciliation has been offered us.

Lost, found, and celebration are what these stories tell us. Judgement and punishment are left with God.