

“Lost and Found”

March 27, 2022

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

I keep learning from the brilliant Amy-Jill Levine just how much I have misunderstood Jesus' stories all my life. “The Prodigal Son” is one of his best-known parables; it's right up there with Aesop's “Androcles and the Lion” or “The Tortoise and the Hare.” The only difference is we're told outright what Aesop is getting at in his fables. Jesus isn't nearly as transparent.

And we can't discount Luke's contribution to shaping this story either. The context we're given for it is a dispute between Jesus and the local righteous folk. They aren't happy about his spending time with “tax collectors and sinners,” so he tells them a series of stories about losing and finding sheep and coins, always followed by rejoicing. But those first two stories really have nothing to do with sinning and being forgiven, the way we tend to imagine. The lost sheep isn't a sinner; it just wandered off when the shepherd lost his focus. And the coin that goes missing can only be lost because the woman misplaced it.

So, neither of those stories really answers the objections of these offended religious people. And if that's true, then maybe we can put their concerns aside. They're obviously fixated on moral responsibility, while Jesus doesn't seem to be concerned with that at all. We do have a tendency to project onto Jesus our own biases. We've been trained to work hard and make our own way, to do everything we can to avoid ending up on Skid Row, so naturally when we hear a story like this one we assume all the fault lies with the younger son.

Or does he just do what sheep do when no one's paying attention to them? Why did the father agree to the younger son's request? Dr. Levine points out in her book *Short Stories by Jesus* that Jewish wisdom has a lot to say about the need for parents to guide their children. The sages of Judaism would have seen this father's cooperation as incredibly foolish. Even if he were to divide up his holdings between the two, the older son normally would have received twice as much as the younger, but the father splits it in half. And she points out he doesn't just split up his property, as our translation says, he divides his life, in Greek the word is *bios*, between them. It's the same word Jesus will use when observing a poor widow giving what she has to the temple in Jerusalem. If anyone is prodigal in this story, it's the father as much as the son.

And the son, predictably, squanders it all. Is that a moral failing on his part? We may think so, but it's in his nature. And he pays a price for that. He ends up in poverty, feeding slop to pigs. Now, we're told at this point the son “comes to himself.” I like that phrase. It gives the impression that he has an epiphany. But again, as Amy-Jill points out, coming to himself could mean he looks at his condition and realizes it's not really his style. He knows where to go to be rescued; he knows who he can count on to do whatever he asks: good ole Dad.

If this were a story about moral responsibility, then the father would never have taken him back. Or at the very least would have put all sorts of conditions on his return. But this is a story about grace, the father's grace toward both his sons and how grace overwhelms every other concern. Is the younger son likely to be less prodigal as a result of the father's grace? Not likely. And is the father likely to be less gracious in the future? I don't think so. Grace is its own reward. If needed the father will run to meet his son over and over and over. And the son will always put his trust in the father's grace, the father's willingness to receive him, no matter how far he wanders.

In this story, contrary to everything I was ever taught about it, the only one who's truly lost is the one who finds grace offensive. And we're not told if the older son is ever found. That's the saddest part of this story. It's not that the older brother was a sap for working so hard all the time; it's hard to imagine him doing anything else. What's sad is his inability to appreciate grace.

Living in a graceless world is the saddest existence I can imagine. Yet so many of us resist it. We want to hold others to standards that we've set for ourselves and withhold extending grace until they meet our conditions. I know I live in the world that way. I would never have welcomed that son back with open arms. And that's not something I'm proud to admit. But I do want to live in a world where if I were to stray, I'd know where I could go to find acceptance. I don't want to be hard and cold like the older brother. I don't want to be full of resentment and bitterness. Do you?

St. Augustine once said, "Our hearts are restless, O God, until we find our rest in Thee." Until we can become open to grace, we'll always be in turmoil, fighting within ourselves against the impulse for grace. Because I think that's really who we truly are. I think that's what Jesus saw when he faced his detractors, the ones who begrudged the company he kept; he saw so many lost souls.

But the beauty of his teaching, of his life and ultimately of his death, is the indomitable belief that those who are lost can be found. There's hope for me, and for you. We aren't condemned to a life of bitterness and resentment, condemned to always be condemning others. What a horrible existence! We can be free of it. We can be free for grace. We can be found. That's what Jesus is calling us to. He's calling us to let go of our judgment and righteous indignation. Let go and live in grace; and let grace live in us.

Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me.
See on the portals he's waiting and watching, watching for you and for me.
"Come home, come home! You who are weary, come home."
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, "O sinner, come home!"

Amen