

“The Joy of Being Found”
September 11, 2022
Scripture: Luke 15:1-10

Jesus’ parables are more than morality tales. People in the first century may have been familiar with stories we call Aesop’s Fables. They’re fairly simple stories about what sorts of behaviors are best to accomplish a certain purpose. Their “lessons” are usually called “morals.” You may know a few of them: “Slow and steady wins the race,” from the “The Tortoise and the Hare.” Or “It is important to use your time well and add meaning to your life,” from the Ant and the Grasshopper. The lessons are clear and the characters are unambiguous.

But that’s not the purpose of Jesus’ parables. The stories he told were meant to give his audience insight into the nature of the kingdom of God and how the values of that kingdom challenge our own values. Jesus’ parables are what Buddhism calls “a finger pointing to the moon.” They direct us toward what really matters. Our tendency is to focus on the instrument, the story, rather than the music we’re being invited to hear.

Because these stories are meant to help us imagine an alternative reality, they have multiple layers of meaning and interpretation. But as New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine points out in her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, the writer of Luke has already chosen an interpretation by setting these stories in the context of a gathering where respectable religious people are “grumbling” about the company Jesus keeps. Matthew’s gospel also tells the story of the Lost Sheep, but in a very different context which leads to a different interpretation. Only Luke’s gospel has the story of the woman searching for a lost coin and the very next story that we didn’t hear, which most of us know as The Prodigal Son. All three lead us, because of their context, to the lesson that God welcomes repentant sinners which explains why Jesus keeps the company he does.

In her book Levine invites us to think about these stories outside the context they’re given by the gospel writers. When we do that we can begin to see how strange they really are and how challenging they can be. For instance, the shepherd who loses a sheep and abandons the ninety-nine “in the wilderness” to find the one that’s wandered is a pretty bizarre scene. What kind of shepherd would do that? As Amy-Jill points out by the time he returns he’ll find he only has one sheep. And who is the sinner repenting in this story? Was it the sheep’s fault it got lost? It sounds like the shepherd lost track of it. No wonder he’s happy to get it back.

In the same way the story about the woman who loses a coin is puzzling. The coin didn’t hide itself from her. She misplaced it, which she acknowledges when she invites her friends to celebrate, “for I have found the coin I had lost.” Did a sinner repent in this story? Or was something restored that had been broken?

If we look only at the shepherd and woman we find two people whose lives are disrupted by loss. Each of them discovers they are incomplete. And each of them is responsible for their circumstance. They failed to keep track of what matters most in their lives. And they’re willing

to do whatever it takes, no matter how long they need to do it, to find their way back to wholeness again. And with wholeness comes immense joy.

And I think being whole is at the heart of Jesus' teaching and ministry. What he reveals about the kingdom of God is it's not a place. God's kingdom isn't somewhere we go; it's a reality we reveal. We reveal God's kingdom through the nature of our relationships with one another. We discover its presence whenever we set aside moralistic judgment of others and acknowledge our need to make a place for everyone who is missing from our lives.

So, these stories by Jesus may not be so much about the ones who have wandered away as they are about the ones who let them wander. Who is missing in our lives? Who have we allowed to stray from the circle of our concern? There are many in our society we have all but written off as lost causes. Many whom we've decided aren't worth the trouble to seek. But without them our lives are incomplete. Whenever anyone is missing from the table of God's love we are all diminished.

Through his parables Jesus tried to open a new way of seeing the world for the people around him. And they still challenge us to look more deeply at our lives, to look beyond a simplistic or moralistic understanding of the world to discover what can truly make us whole. We find wholeness when we open ourselves up to the presence of others whose lives we have discounted or even despised. When we do that without resentment or judgment, but embracing the image of God present in them, we will experience joy beyond imagining. Not out of some paternalistic self-satisfaction, as though we're deigning to lower ourselves, but out of a genuine sense of connection, of completion.

In the native tradition of South Africa there is a wonderful concept known by the term "ubuntu." It has various definitions in English, but my favorite is "I am because we are." It expresses our interdependency, the awareness that we cannot be whole if anyone is absent. To what lengths are you willing to go to be complete? Until we're willing to leave everything behind to seek out those who are missing, to search every corner to find those whom we've lost, we will always wander from God's kingdom. Jesus invites us to find our way home by seeking and searching, by gathering and welcoming, by making room and providing access to those who have been left out, even if it means losing authority or control ourselves. God's kingdom is bigger than the limits of our experience and interests, and when we find it among us we'll begin to know the joy that comes with being whole.

Amen