

Grumbling About Mercy
A Sermon on Luke 15:1-10
Proper 19
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Introduction

Luke's parables are like a prism. You can see different things in them depending on which characters you identify with in the story.

In the parable of the lost sheep, how you interpret the parable depends upon which character you identify with. You can be the shepherd, looking for a lost sheep. Then it is a parable about pastoral care and evangelism. You can be the lost sheep. Then it is a parable about grace and being found. You can be one of the 99 sheep who were never lost. You feel abandoned when the shepherd leaves you to go after the sheep who strayed away.

I want to hear the parable today from the perspective of the never lost. Luke's frame suggests that it the point of the story: Jesus asks the never lost to share in the joy of finding a lost sheep and a lost coin.

First Move: Two Parables about Finding the Lost

Today's text falls into three parts: a frame and two parables. Scholars in the Jesus Seminar believe that the parables come from the historical Jesus but that the frame comes from Luke.

The frame sounds like Luke. "All the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus to listen to him." Luke likes to describe the universal appeal of the gospel: "All the tax collectors and sinners." They were taking the initiative to draw near to Jesus. They wanted to hear him. Hearing the gospel is a mark of discipleship. They are not disciples yet, but this is a good first step.

Tax collectors were scorned because they were seen as collaborators with the Romans. They were Jews who were hired by the Romans to collect taxes from other Jews. The tax collectors in Jesus' day signed contracts with the Romans. They would pay the Romans a fixed amount for taxes for an entire village and then collect as much as they could from all the Jews in the village and keep the difference. The Jews thought of them as cheaters and profiteers. They enriched themselves at the expense of their own people.

Sinners covered different categories of people. They could be Jews who were lax about following the Jewish law. What we would call a secular Jew today. Or they could be people who flagrantly broke the commandments, such as murderers, adulterers and thieves. Sinners also could mean Jews who worked in an occupation that caused them to violate the commandments, such as prostitutes or money-lenders or hog farmers.

Tax collectors and sinners could also be a symbol for Gentiles. In Luke's day, most Jews had rejected Christ. The church was becoming increasingly Gentile. Jews would have to compromise their kosher laws to eat with Gentiles.

The Pharisees and the scribes are grumbling. It is the same word that was used to describe the newly-liberated Hebrew slaves as they grumbled against Moses when he was leading them in the wilderness. The people longed for the fleshpots of Egypt. They still thought like slaves and acted like slaves. The entire generation of slaves would have to die out before they could become the people of Israel.

The Pharisees and scribes are acting in good faith. They are offended that Jesus is welcoming outcasts and eating with them. They fear that Jesus is violating the purity laws, which were intended to shape Jewish identity. Unless they preserved the Jewish way of life, which includes the kosher laws, the Jews would be swallowed up by the Gentile majority.

Jesus tells them a series of parables. The first is the parable of the lost sheep. A certain man is herding 100 sheep and loses one of them. Jesus says that the man loses the sheep not that the sheep got lost on its own. The man leaves the 99 in the wilderness to go looking for the lost sheep. The wilderness is a dangerous place, full of predators. This seems reckless, the man is endangering the safety of 99 for the sake of the one. The man keeps searching until he finds the sheep. When he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders and rejoices.

Early Christians saw this as a story about Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The Gospel of John has a famous discourse that begins, I Am the Good Shepherd. I have shown you the image on the screen before. It is an image of a youthful boy carrying a sheep on his shoulders. This is an image of Christ as the Good Shepherd. This is the earliest surviving image for Christ. It dates from the late 2nd to early 4th century. It was found on the walls of tombs belonging to wealthy Christians in the catacombs of Rome.

The shepherd rejoices while he is carrying the sheep home. He has found the lost sheep and brought it back into the flock, into community. When he gets home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and asks them to celebrate with him over finding the lost sheep.

Luke concludes the parable with a saying that ties it in with the frame. There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than for 99 righteous ones who have no need of repentance.

Jesus tells another parable. A certain woman has ten drachmas and loses one. Jesus uses a woman as an image of God. Crossan calls it: I Am the Good Housewife. A drachma is a coin that was probably worth about a day's wage. The coins represent all her savings. She is a poor woman. Her house has a dirt floor, a small door and no window. She burns a lamp, sweeps the floor and searches until she finds it. When she finds the coin, she calls all her friends and neighbors and says, "Rejoice with me because I found the drachma which I lost." Friends and neighbors are feminine in the Greek text. Her friends and neighbors are women and girls.

The emphasis in the parables of the historical Jesus is on divine initiative. The shepherd and the woman take all the action. They search relentlessly until they find the lost. The stories conclude with joy in finding the lost and celebrating at recovering them. There is no judgment, no scolding, no shaming, only joy.

Luke adds a moralizing statement to match his frame. "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God [for] one sinner who repents." Luke invites the grumbling Pharisees and scribes to share in the joy in heaven at finding the lost.

Second Move: Grumbling about Kingdom Ethics

Many of us identify with the Pharisees and the scribes. We identify with the elder son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which follows today's text. It seems unfair. Why does the father kill the fatted calf for the Prodigal Son who disrespects the father and squanders his inheritance? Why does the shepherd risk losing the 99 who never strayed for the sake of the one who did stray?

How does that make the 99 obedient sheep feel? They are the good people who go to church every Sunday instead of sleeping late or going to the lake. They are the people who bring a dish to share at fellowship dinner every month. They donate clothes for children at the border. Some even buy new clothes for them. They give as much as they can in offering. Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." Luke 5:31-32. Wouldn't we be offended if Jesus rejoices more over the ones who never participate than over us?

It offends our sense of reciprocity and fairness. We believe in karma. You get what you deserve. If you cross the line, there will be consequences. If there are no consequences, that is not mercy, it is enabling. You will develop bad habits. You will hurt people.

In our culture, justice means retributive justice. You are punished if you commit a crime. Retribution means you get paid back proportionately for the harm you have committed.

Psychologists today question whether reward and punishment is a good motivation for youth and adults. Real motivation comes from wanting to do something, not from wanting to get a reward or avoid punishment.

If you are lost, isn't the experience of being lost painful enough without adding punishment to it?

The shepherd and the woman in the parables don't want to punish, they want to restore to wholeness. There is original unity. You are part of the flock. You are part of the body of Christ. Then something happens to disrupt the unity. The shepherd and the woman search relentlessly to restore the unity.

We also grumble if someone is brought into community that we don't like. People today are intensely tribal, and we don't want to be in a group with someone from a tribe we don't like. Stereotyping is worse on social media. I sometimes feel that if I take a position on a social issue and post it on social media, I will be attacked from the left and the right. It's hard to be pure enough to please some people. I feel like I cannot please some people on the left—they write me off as a privileged white male incapable of understanding social oppression.

We are letting the culture shape our identity. We don't want to search for the lost—we want to let them go. Good riddance. We don't want to join the party when the lost are found—we are mad that a party is thrown for the lost. Why don't we have a party instead for those who were never lost?

Third Move: Embracing Our True Identity

The parables are addressed to the never lost. Jesus has greater expectations for the never lost. He expects us to be shepherds as well as sheep.

Jesus asks us, will you join the party? Will you share in God's joy at finding the lost?

Our faith should give us a sense of joy, not obligation and duty. For the church to grow, it must have the attitude of joy at bringing in the lost, not resentment and superiority.

Who are the lost today? I believe that the lost is anyone who derives their identity from the culture. They see themselves as the culture sees them, instead of as God sees them.

The numbers have changed. It is no longer one that is lost and 99 who are never lost. The lost are in the majority now.

If we are to be good shepherds, we will help them reclaim their identity as beloved sons and daughters of God. When Jesus was baptized, he heard God say, “You are my son, the beloved. With you I take delight.” Jesus was sinless because he stayed faithful to that identity for his entire life.

God makes that same affirmation when each of us is baptized. God delights in each one of us. Each one of us is unique. Each one of us has unique gifts to offer.

We have a hard time accepting that identity. We are told that we not worthy because we are overweight or aging or in debt or gay. We let society choose an identity for us. We identify with social groups. We are Americans. We are graduates of a certain college. We are members of a particular profession and a political party. We are liberal or conservative, mainline or evangelical.

This is our image of ourselves, which is largely an image that society has imposed on us. It is what Thomas Merton calls the False Self. Our core identity is a beloved child of God.

Forming a new identity is much the same task as the Apostle Paul undertook. He brought disparate groups of people together in community by helping to build a new identity in Christ. Baptism in Romans 6:3-4 brings a new identity, dying to our old selves and rising to new life in Christ. There is no longer slave nor free, Gentile nor Jew, male or female. For all one in Christ Jesus.

The Pharisees and the scribes were right. The stakes are high. They fear they will lose their identity as Jews by following Christ.

They may have been right about Luke, who apparently believed that the church had replaced Israel as the people of God. There is a new school of thinking about Paul—scholars today believe that Paul thought there were two tracks for salvation, one for Jews and one for Gentiles. Jews would not have to give up their identity. They would still be circumcised and follow the law. Luke and Paul believed that they were on the doorstep of a new age in salvation history when Jews and Gentiles would come together to worship God on God’s holy mountain.

It turns out that the fears of the Pharisees and the scribes were justified. Orthodox Christianity over the next 1800 years did treat the church as replacing Israel as the people of God. The image of the good shepherd soon gave way to images of Jesus as King.

The church in the last 60 years has begun to recognize that its triumphalist theology was the foundation of anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust. Today Disciples recognize that we are people of God only but not the only people of God. God has provided different paths to salvation for different cultures.

Conclusion

The stakes are high for us too. We have to give up the comfortable identity that the secular culture has given us. We may grumble about it. We still think like slaves and act like slaves. We have to let go of our ideologies and our cultural baggage to enter the kingdom.

Then we can model the kingdom for the lost. We can help them reclaim their identity as beloved children of God. We will share in the joy of the shepherd and the woman with a coin at finding the lost.

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