

### **ECCLESIASTES 2:24-26**

24 There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; <sup>25</sup>for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? <sup>26</sup>For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

### **LUKE 15:1-10 (11-32)**

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup>'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup>When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup>And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." <sup>7</sup>Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

<sup>8</sup> 'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup>When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." <sup>10</sup>Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

### **SERMON**

Over the span of the next few months, we're going to be taking some time to explore and think about the parables of Jesus. Now, if I were to compile a greatest hits album from Jesus' preaching it would be a no brainer: parables. These little short stories were Jesus' M.O., in a pedagogical sense. And so before we jump into the parables for today, I think it's important to cover two bases: first, what is a

parable? And second, why are they worth studying, you know, other than the fact that Jesus taught them?

So, first, what is a parable. Now, to get a little nerdy for a minute, let's break the word down into its Greek roots; "para" means "along side, or together with" like in the word parallel, two lines along side, together with one another. The second half of the word comes from "balo" which means "to cast or to throw," like in the word "ballistics," as in the study of how an object flies when it is thrown or cast out. So, "parable" literally means cast along side another. And that's a pretty good description of what these short stories were meant to do. They were used by Jesus to prompt his disciples into thinking about their lives by casing along side them a provocative story. A parable is not an allegory. In an allegory, each little piece and detail lines up perfectly with some greater meaning, and you need a sort of code to unlock that meaning. Like, for example, "The Pilgrim's Progress." Once you know that it's a story about Christian discipleship, all of the characters, places, and details line up and make sense as part of the greater whole.

Parables, on the other hand, aren't stories where each and every element lines up perfectly with some great metaphor. In many ways, they're sort of supposed to be intentionally vague and a bit confusing. In fact, one of the great errors of Christian theological history has been trying to make each and every piece of a parable fit perfectly into some great allegory. They're just not meant to stretch that far. The metaphor never holds up to that kind of interpretive stress.

But this recommendation not to take them too far isn't to say that they're not nuanced in their own ways. One scholar of the parables said, "we might be better off thinking less about what they "mean" and more about what they can "do": remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb."<sup>1</sup> Jesus used these stories to challenge and teach his disciples, not to comfort and console them. So, if we find ourselves in a position of hearing the parables as sweet, cute stories, which we do more often than not, we're probably reading them the wrong way. These stories should make us feel a little uneasy, they should challenge our worldview, and provoke us into a different kind of living. They should be kind of hard to hear.

And I think that's why parables are worth studying, because more often than not, I remember and think about the parables as something like children's stories. Something I talk about during the children's message, a sort of Bible Aesop's fable...a little life lesson wrapped up in a few sentences about sheep or seeds or treasure. But that's not at all what they are, and so they bear revisiting every so often, to give ourselves the chance to hear them again, maybe in a new way. To allow them to "do" exactly what they're meant to do: "remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb" us.

So, each week we'll take a parable to discuss, and I'll present just one possible way the parable could be challenging us. Parables speak to different people in different places at different times in different ways. Over our own lives, the meaning of an individual parable may shift and change. That's great! These aren't stories with one meaning, they're meant to carry numerous facets and

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, page 4.

different perspectives for interpretation. Each week, I'll try to present the parable as it may have been heard by a first century Jewish community, and then beyond that, it's up to you to see how the story strikes you. What do you hear? What details stick out to you? How does the parable provoke and challenge you?

Did any of you ever watch Reading Rainbow? It was a wonderful television show all about kid's books, and at the end of each episode, the host, Levar Burton of Star Trek fame, would review a book. He would end his review by saying "but you don't have to take my word for it!" and then cut to a few videos of kids sharing their thoughts on the book, whether they agreed or disagreed with Levar. That's how I want us to hear these parables. As the pastor, I have the privilege of sharing some of my perspective, but instead of tying each sermon into a nice little bow, instead, I want to end these on the note of "you don't have to take my word for it!" Go, read the parable for yourself, and spend time thinking about it, and listen for how this story challenges you.

Our parables for today come right to us from the lost and found. The lost sheep, the lost coin. Normally, the Lost or Prodigal Son is included in this list, but that parable is too complicated to deal with well in this time frame. So, for today, we're just going to look at the lost sheep and the lost coin. These two parables have a lot of similarities, they basically tell the same story twice over: they start as one of the many is lost, the shepherd and the woman notice the absence, they go out looking, and when the lost is found and restored, they host a party. A party, ironically enough, that probably consisted of a little roast mutton and cost more than the silver coin which was found.

Traditionally, in Christian circles, we tend to hear these stories as parables of repentance. One sinner is lost, and God, the shepherd of the sheep or the woman with the coins, goes out looking for that one lost sinner, bringing them back into the fold, or the purse as it may be. That's a fine interpretation, and it's not wrong, but that's also probably not the way Jesus' followers would have heard this story when he first told it. And that's for a really understandable reason: coins and sheep do not lose themselves.

Think about it. If the coin and the sheep represent lost sinners, that's actually kind of a weird story, because coins don't roll away of their own volition, and sheep can't be held personally responsible for wandering off. Sheep wander, coins roll, and it's actually the responsibility of the owner, in this case the woman and the shepherd, to keep track of their own property. So, if the coin and the sheep are in fact lost sinners, then we're left with this odd idea that God is the one responsible for losing the lost sinners. But we don't believe God is the responsible party for the sinful choices we make. So, I'm not personally convinced by this age-old interpretation of these stories.

Instead, try this on for size, what if these are stories that invite us to see the world from the point of view, not of the coin or the sheep, but instead from the perspective of the shepherd and the woman. What if these stories, cast alongside our own lives, are really provoking us to think carefully about what we have, and perhaps what we've lost without noticing.

Think about this image a bit: if you stack 9 or 10 quarters on a table, it's not immediately noticeable whether the stack has 9 or 10 coins, you actually have to count. And if you look at a field or hill, I don't think a single one of us could see the difference between 99 or 100 sheep. I know that I wouldn't know a difference without actually lining up the sheep in groups to count by 10s. In each of those parables, the responsible party must have actually taken inventory to notice the missing 1, and in going to search for it, there's something implied about the others not being whole without that lost sheep or coin. When the wholeness of the 10 or 100 is restored, there's celebration to be had.

So, I wonder, what if these parables invite us to think about what we've been given, and about bearing responsibility to maintain the whole? As that same scholar writes, "We need to take count not only of our blessings, but also of those in our families, and in our communities. And once we count, we need to act. Finding the lost, whether they are sheep, coins, or people, takes work. It also requires our efforts, and from those efforts there is the potential for wholeness and joy."<sup>2</sup>

When I cast that alongside my own life, right now, 2000 or so years after Jesus first told this little story, it makes me pause and think about a number of uncomfortable challenges to my own self. I wonder, as with the lost coin or lost sheep, do I value the things I own? The blessings I've been given? For me, it brings to mind the power of living in a very disposable culture: if you break it, don't worry: a new one is less expensive than repairing the old. What's

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 70.

one sheep? You have 99 others. I worry that it's too easy to value convenience and speed over the work of seeking and finding the lost. I don't regularly see where my trash goes, literally and figuratively. I don't live with the consequences of my waste, whether it's a physical item I throw away or something less tangible, like a friendship I don't put the work into to maintain. And when I don't see the consequences of what is thrown out or lost along the way, I lose out.

I think one of the challenges and provocations of these lost and found parables, is just that question: are we willing to do the work to discover what may be lost, and then do we bear the responsibility to bring integrity back to the whole? Be it a flock, a purse, or even in the case of the prodigal son, a whole family, the discomfort of these stories pushes directly back on a disposable culture. But it's a message I think falls cleanly in line with Jesus' other teachings: in the kingdom of God, all things matter. From the smallest seed, to each person, to the largest mountain. And they cannot be considered whole without each piece being redeemed. And this has implications for our whole lives. For what we own, sure, but also about this world we live in, caring for the gifts of air and water, animal and plant. And perhaps most challenging of all, our relationships and communities. That same scholar challenged me with one of her quotes: "It's much safer to assure the faithful how our souls are saved through divine grace, rather than to suggest that our societies are saved through personal and corporate aid to the poor. It's much more comforting to hear that God is a loving father who welcomes us home no matter how much we stray, than it is to hear an exhortation to reconcile with the brother, sister, or fellow

congregant with whom we have not spoken for twenty years.”<sup>3</sup> And this is the vision Jesus consistently invites us into: being a people concerned with the whole, to do the work to seek and find, and then to celebrate the redemption in all things. To make sure that every lost thing is found. But you don’t have to take my word for it!

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 20.