

Sundays after Pentecost - Year C [Proper 19]

September 11, 2022

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Psalm 51: 1-11; Luke 15: 1-10

Grace to you and peace from God - Father, + Son and Holy Spirit.

Let me introduce you to Dr. Amy-Jill Levine. She describes herself as a “Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominantly Protestant divinity school in the buckle of the Bible Belt.” She says she is an “unorthodox member of an Orthodox synagogue in Nashville,” which is quite evident when you discover Levine is a noted Jewish New Testament scholar. A very rare combination. She taught both Jewish studies and New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, is a popular speaker and has published many books as she seeks to correct anti-Jewish, sexist and other harmful interpretation of the Bible.

What Levine can add to our study of the Bible is a different view than we might get from our Christian spectacles. She was not raised listening to the interpretations of the gospels that we have heard. She has great respect for Jesus, Christianity and the New Testament. She, however, brings an in-depth understanding of the Judaism in which Jesus was raised, lived and taught. In other words, she comes at parables like the ones we heard today, considering how the average Jewish person listening to Jesus at the time might interpret what he is saying. For that reason, she can take us into a parable from a different direction that can open up other possible interpretations.

Both the parables today end with almost the same summarizing sentence, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Levine observes that it was rare for Jesus, or any rabbi or teacher, to “Provide a ready-made interpretation: a set of instructions for how to open the package.” They would put out a story and let students try on different interpretations and debate one another. In that debate, they would dig into different or deeper territory, where the real learning happens. There was always meant to be different facets, approaches and perspectives when a teacher put out a proposition. Add the fact that neither sheep nor coins deliberately run

away or are able to repent and you begin to wonder. Did a conscientious Luke take an important teaching of Jesus and add it to these parables to help us later disciples?

So, if “we set these ready-made explanations off to the side for a moment, and try to understand the stories all by themselves — what do you get? We get a shepherd who loses a sheep, goes off searching for it, and is overjoyed when he find it. And we get a woman who loses a valuable coin, then cleans her house from top to bottom, searching for it. She’s overjoyed when she discovers it... with the dust bunnies.”¹ What are we to make of it?

One detail Levine points out, that I never thought of, is that both the owner of the sheep and the coins are wealthy people. One hundred sheep is a huge flock. Most shepherds listening to Jesus would not have anywhere near that number. The woman has ten silver coins. “How many peasant women sitting there listening, in that subsistence society, would have ever dreamed of holding ten silver coins in her hand? Not one”² likely.

“Jesus could perfectly well have told his parables about a shepherd with five sheep, or a householder with two coins — but he doesn’t. It’s important to him that, when his peasant audience hears these parables, it’s like they’re watching [an episode of the] *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.”

“Why is that important? It’s important because his listeners could scarcely have believed that a person who had so much could have gotten so wrought-up over losing [what would be comparatively] so little. The shepherd, as they understand it, is a little bit crazy. He leaves 99 sheep on their own to go looking for the missing one? As for the woman with the ten coins — if she is that wealthy, surely she’s got servant-girls to sweep out the house for her.” [Having so very many sheep and coins, how did either even notice one was missing? Yet] “despite their wealth, these two do pay very close attention to what they’ve lost.”³

If we step away from the usual interpretation of these parables as allegories — in which the shepherd and the woman symbolize God and we are the lost sheep or coin —

if we step into the shoes of the average Jewish peasant listening to Jesus at the time — what other points might Jesus have been making? Here is where the wonder and pleasure of Bible study begins — sitting with scripture alone or talking with another believer and letting the Holy Spirit open and lead you to possible learnings.

Maybe Jesus was trying to teach us to be sure to count our blessing — you may not realize what you have or what you've misplaced. Perhaps Jesus is saying something about not taking any of our talents, resources or relationships for granted. Maybe he wants us to notice that the herd or collection of coins was incomplete when even one was missing and we need to think of how that applies to our understanding of community, neighborhood or church. Maybe Jesus is trying to tell us something about losses that everyone faces, even “the guy with a hundred sheep, or the housewife with a small fortune in silver.” Maybe the search for the missing “one” is telling us that part of our discipleship is “a quest for restoration and wholeness”⁴ of God's creation.

Now, I'm going to exercise some bravery and risk your wrath. I'm stopping here. I leave you to wrestle with these parables. What gems do you find? What insights might the Spirit be offering you at this time? Where might the parable intersect in your life? There is no one right answer. As long as what you find remains within the love of Jesus, you have a gift to savor. And when you find it, let me know. I love a good party.

Linda M Alessandri 9/9/22

ENDNOTES

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1. Carl Wilson, “Stories Jesus Told: What's Lost Is Found Again,” July 5, 2015 posted at pointpresbyterian.org
 2. Ibid
 3. Ibid
 4. P. 20 Jennifer E. Copeland, “Clean Sweep” *Christian Century*, September 7, 2004