

Luke 15: 1-10 "Lost and Found" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/15/2019

A story is told of a kindergarten teacher who was suddenly taken ill and a replacement had to be found very quickly. The substitute teacher was at a loss as to what to do with the children so she decided to tell them lots of stories. At the end of each story, she would say, "And the moral of that story is...". By the end of the day, the children had sat through more than a dozen morals and they were overwhelmed. The regular teacher recovered and returned to class. One student ran up and gave her a great big hug saying, "I'm so glad you're back. I like you better than the other teacher." The teacher was flattered and couldn't help but ask why? The child looked into the teacher's eyes and said, "Because you don't have any morals."

Jesus' stories were parables where the moral or teaching point was multi-layered meaning that the story spoke many truths, often dependent upon the situation of each listener. In Luke 15, all manner of listeners are leaning in to hear his teachings. The disciples are there to receive instruction; the Pharisees and Sadducees are there to keep tabs on Jesus' morals, many believing he has none; and then there are those who don't really belong anywhere because they live on the fringes. They are described as the tax collectors and sinners, which means they are the ones nobody wants to hang around with, for fear that their good reputations will get tarnished. It is a group of strange bedfellows and it doesn't take long for the whispering to start among those who are considered the insiders. Speaking of the tax collectors and "sinners," they say, "Who invited them? Why would Jesus embrace this woman, this man? Doesn't he know who they are, what they do for a living? Where are his morals? He talks of godly things on the one hand, and yet he eats with them on the other."

Perceiving the questions, Jesus begins to address the growing tension in the crowd. He focuses upon what this crowd most values, hard-earned money and the health and safety of those with whom one must protect. Using common relationships, Jesus teaches about the nature of God in terms they can understand. God is portrayed as a shepherd searching for a lost sheep and, hold onto your seat, a woman searching for a lost coin. No other parable in the New Testament presents a woman as a metaphor or allegory for God. The story would have been very shocking, not just because God is depicted in both masculine and feminine terms, but God is revealed in both stories as One who searches for the lost and rejoices when they are found. But such stories would not have shocked little Maureen, who was watching a thunderstorm one evening from her front window. She was clearly in awe. Her dad walked over to her and asked if everything was alright, concerned she might be afraid of the frequent lightning. The little girl looked up with wide eyes and asked, "Daddy, do you think God has lost somebody out there?" In the context of our parables, the answer is yes and God won't give up until they are found.

In Frederick Buechner's classic book, Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale, Buechner sees God as a comic shepherd who gets a bigger kick out of finding one lost sheep than out of the 99 who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place. It is comedy at its best in that the stories reflect the outlandishness of our God who does impossible things with impossible people. If you think about it, the idea of leaving 99 sheep unprotected to go in search of just one wayward sheep is pretty silly. It is kind of ridiculous to spend an entire day cleaning the house to find one coin, when you could earn the same amount, if not more, working at your job. The moral should be don't waste your efforts. Why risk losing

more sheep, more money, during an unpredictable search? Wisdom teaches us that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush so stick to what is safe. But Jesus reveals that our God is not about safety or predictability as much as God is about grace, unconditional love in action. God is a comedian who uses humor to help us swallow the uncomfortable truth, so that it goes down a bit easier and hopefully finds a receptive home. Jesus speaks to his critics saying, "Once found, nobody should be grumbling, but rather everybody should be rejoicing. I'm telling you like it is in heaven: there'll be more celebrating over one sinner who has a change of heart than over 99 virtuous people who have no need to change their hearts."

Both parables use the word lost multiple times, which tends to lead some readers to believe they are all about the lost, those who need to be redeemed in order to be welcomed into the inner circle. Suddenly, tones of judgment and repentance are leaked into parables which were not meant to focus on the lost, but on the One who diligently searches, and the joy which is experienced when the lost are found. Think about it - neither a sheep nor a coin can repent. A lost sheep that is able to bleat out in distress often will not do so, out of fear. Instead it will curl up and lie down in the wild brush, hiding from predators. It is so afraid in its own seclusion that it can't assist in its own rescue. The shepherd must bear the full weight in bringing the immobilized sheep home. Similarly the lost coin, an inanimate object, is unable to call out or shine more brightly to bring attention to itself. Its rescue is totally dependent upon the woman's diligence. Therefore, these parables are not a call to repentance, but to invite the righteous to participate in the celebration. Whether one joins the celebration is critical, because it reveals whether one's relationships are based on merit or mercy. Those who find

God's mercy offensive can't celebrate with the angels when one finally is found. Thus they exclude themselves from God's grace.

These parables are difficult to swallow for those of us who enjoy our self-righteous stature. Our affinity for moralism has led us to focus far too much on an extensive list of sins that perpetuate being lost and that ultimately discourage acts of reconciliation. We reduce the most difficult of matters to the simplest and starkest of terms and cripple our ability to understand and appreciate the moral complexities inherent in many issues. Phillip Gulley tells a story of being a pacifist active in the peace movement and having a friend join the military. Phillip was horrified believing that being a Christian and a soldier didn't coincide. He couldn't see any alternatives. The problem with such judgment and simplistic interpretation is that if Philip's friend had any misgivings to begin with, he would have been loathe to admit them, once Philip confronted him. Philip recognized, after much soul searching, the error of his ways. More often than not, while judgment attempts to change behavior, its very nature pushes people towards the activity it sought to curtail. On the other hand, choosing reconciliation over judgment gives cause for the whole community to have a party. The community is made more complete as those who were once on the fringes are now invited to sit at the feast of God. In the household of God, when one is restored, we are all better for it.

One of my favorite children's books is Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny* because it reflects the God whom we see in our stories. The baby bunny is trying to escape his mother. He offers numerous scenarios of escape. He will be a bird and fly away. His mother says she will be the tree that he comes home to. The bunny says he will be a sailboat and sail away. The mother bunny says she will be the wind and blow where she wants him to go. In the

end, we see the mother bunny as loving, seeking, and persistent never giving up the search for her child. Seeking the lost and partying with the found, God invites us to turn aside from the grumbling and start spreading the joy of reconciliation with those who have been on the fringes, something which is far more difficult than judgement, but infinitely more satisfying.