

“Taking a Second Look at the Prodigal Son”

Date: July 7, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Parables of Jesus, series

Themes: Judaism, Lost, Families

Texts: Luke 15:1-10; Luke 15:11-32

Today we will take a look at a very familiar parable of Jesus. I feel a little bit like a character in a snow-globe after reading Rabbi Amy-Jill Levine’s chapter on this one. Her unique perspective has things all shook up, and there’s a lot to think about.

For one thing, she says the title of the parable has focused too much on the youngest son and in so doing may have missed the point of the parable entirely. If she were to retitile the parable she might call it “The Lost Son,” leaving open the question of which son is really lost.

The parable begins, “*some man had two sons.*” Immediately a Jewish audience would think of numerous examples from their own Scriptures. Adam had two sons, Cain and Abel. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob.

At the time, everyone would have thought to identify with the younger son. But they were in for a surprise when the younger son turns out not to be the hero of the story. Instead he turns out to be an irresponsible, self-indulgent, and probably indulged child. Displaying a sense of humor, Rabbi Levine says, “Despite his being Jewish, I would *not* be pleased to have him date my daughter.”

I will not take the time to tell you the whole story; you’ve heard it before. And since it is familiar, we think we know what it means. Rabbi Levine asks us to reconsider what we think we know about this parable, and does so by focusing a great deal of time on the elder son. We know

how the younger son asked for and squandered his inheritance, how he returned home and how his father was delighted to have him return.

Rabbi Levine informs us, first-century listeners may not have heard repentance, but conniving. Junior recalls that Daddy still has money, and he might be able to get more. Unlike the sheep and the coin – he has not been “found.” Rather, he recovers his true nature, he “comes to himself,” and *that* self is one who knows that Daddy will do anything he asks.

Now notice, *who* was not mentioned as being invited to the party? *Some man had two sons.* Most of us, including the dad in the parable, had lost count. We have focused so much attention on the younger son we have totally overlooked the elder son.

When the shepherd finds his sheep, and the woman finds her lost coin, they call their friends and neighbors to celebrate. But no one runs out to invite the older son to the feast. No one noticed he was missing.

We don't know what the brother's relationship had been, but tradition suggests that it may well have been dysfunctional. The Bible is full of such families: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers, and even Mary and Martha. There is tension and problems and dysfunction in most families, even the good ones. I imagine some of you sitting here this morning have had some difficult relations with some of your family members.

But even if the two brothers *had* a good relationship, the older one cannot find it in his heart to rejoice at the news of Junior's return. His own sense of being ignored – by both his brother and his father – outweighs any joy he might have had. He has been ignored. His alienation is palpable.

And his father, going out, comforted and urged him. The father is *now*

in the role of the man searching for his sheep or the woman who is searching for her coin. He needs to return the lost to the home; he needs to make his family complete.

But children are not sheep or coins; they are not property. They are people. Unlike a sheep you can hoist on your shoulders, or a coin you can pick up, returning the lost son to his home proves much more difficult. Children, unlike sheep or coins, have long memories, emotional needs and a voice of their own.

The father did not know until *this* moment that the elder son was the one who was truly lost to him. Once the recognition comes, he does what the shepherd and the woman do, he *seeks* the son whom he loves, in order to make his family whole again.

The father pleads with him to come join the celebration. He tries to comfort him by telling him he has always had his paternal love. But at this point, no speech would resolve the older son's turmoil. He first needs to express his own resentment.

“And answering, he said to his father, “Look, all these years I am slaving for you, and not one commandment of yours have I passed by, and for me not one young goat did you give so that my friends and I might rejoice. But when your son, the one, the one who ate up your life with whores came, you sacrificed for him the grain-fed calf.”

Years of resentment have finally boiled over and found expression. The son's faithfulness and responsibility has been overlooked. Once again, the problem child receives more attention, more love, than the prudent and faithful one. The son's alienation is reflected in his words, “this son of yours.” Not “my brother,” but “this son of yours.” Now he distances himself from both his father and brother.

The story continues.....

“And the father said to his oldest son, “Child, you always are with me, and everything that is mine is yours. But it remains necessary to cheer and to rejoice, because your brother, this one, was dead, and lived to life, and being lost, even he was found.”

Rather than using the common translation “Son,” Rabbi Levine prefers the Greek word which means Child. It is a term of endearment. The father was attempting to reconcile with his son. In the father’s view, the son had never been lost. But what the father felt and what the son felt were two different reactions. The eldest son complains that Dad showed affection to the prodigal he had never shown to him. He never felt his father’s love.

The father tries to restore the relationship between his two sons, changing the son’s language from “that son of yours” to “your brother.” By doing so he reminds him that there *is* a relationship that exists between them. And if either brother was missing, the family would not be whole.

The parable ends without any easy answers. The father and the son are still standing there in the field. What would we do, if we were the older son? Do we attend the party? What’s going to happen to this family when the father dies and the elder son obtains his inheritance?

What do we do if we identify with the father and find our own children lost? Is repeated pleading sufficient? Is our love enabling bad behavior? What does a parent do to show love that a child never felt? Sheep and coins are easy; children less so.

What are we to make of the younger son? It is neat and tidy to see him as transformed by grace and fully repentant. But first century listeners to the parable probably would not have. Neither does Rabbi Levine. She sees him as doing what he’s always done – taking advantage of the father’s love. You don’t do much work sitting around eating fatted calf.

If the younger son has truly repented, how will he act now? The father has provided an initial act of reconciliation, but at some point he will need to prove his own responsibility. There are no easy answers to complicated family dynamics.

We have come to see this parable as one of repentance and forgiveness. But in this household no one has expressed sorrow at hurting another, and no one has expressed forgiveness. And yet family life goes on. The sheep and the coin did not repent, but the celebration occurred nonetheless.

So, let's hold at bay, at least for a moment, the desire to see this as an allegory about repentance and forgiveness. But, what then does the parable teach us? It provokes us with simple exhortations. Recognize that the one you have lost may be in your own household.

Look around, do we know who the lost ones are – in our family, in our community, in our nation, in our world? Then do whatever it takes to find the lost and then celebrate with others. In doing so you can share the joy, and others can help to prevent the recovered from ever being lost again.

The parables teaches us, don't wait until you receive an apology; you may never get one. Don't wait until you can muster the ability to forgive; you may never find it. Don't stew in your sense of being ignored, for there is nothing that can be done to correct the past.

Instead, go have lunch. Go celebrate, and invite others to join you. If the repenting and forgiving come later, so much the better, and if not, you still will have done the right thing. You will have begun a process that might lead to reconciliation. May we be at peace, without easy answers. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *Short Stories by Jesus* by Amy-Jill Levine. Harper Collins Publishing, NY, NY, 2014, "Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son," pp. 27-76