

Proper 19, Year C,

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The parable of the “Initially Oblivious Owner”

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There is a medieval Jewish interpretation or midrash of the story of Moses in his shepherding days that goes like this:

Once, while Moses our Teacher was tending [his father-in-law] Yitro’s sheep, one of the sheep ran away. Moses ran after it until it reached a small, shaded place. There, the lamb came across a pool and began to drink. As Moses approached the lamb, he said, “I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. You are so exhausted!” He then put the lamb on his shoulders and carried him back. The Holy One said, “Since you tend the sheep of human beings with such overwhelming love - by your life, I swear you shall be the shepherd of My sheep, Israel.”

([https://www.sefaria.org/Shemot\\_Rabbah.2.2?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Shemot_Rabbah.2.2?lang=bi) Shemot Rabbah, translation from the Sefaria Community, Translation also shared by Amy—Jill Levine)

Jewish Scripture scholar Amy-Jill Levine shares a version of this story in her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, which explores the parables of Jesus from a Jewish perspective. She often writes about Christian Scriptures and describes herself as a “Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominantly Christian divinity school in the buckle of the Bible Belt.” (back of book blurb).

As scholars go, she is hilarious. And she makes one think twice about our traditional interpretations of the Scriptures, given how prone Christians have been to anti-Semitism from our early days. She has some interesting things to say about the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin that we have today. Not shared in our Gospel reading from Luke is the third parable in the set, The Story of the Prodigal Son”, but I’m sure we’ll get there another Sunday.

“All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable...” Luke’s story begins.

Levine draws us away from making the setting for these parables to be the bad-pharisees vs the misunderstood and outcast tax collectors and sinners. To first-century people of Israel, tax collectors were selling them out to the Romans. And she reminds us that sinners in the Gospels were often rich people who failed to attend to the poor. (35-36) What these people would be to the Jesus’ first-century audience were those who were problematic in their own community. Maybe they were people who would not be missed if they just disappeared – which is problem in all sorts of communities. We miss our friends when they are gone. We don’t always notice those we would tend not to care about. And we might really fail to see our own role in “losing” members. Don’t lose that thought.

And here Levine says is the crux of these lost and found stories. For the most part they are about things – a sheep, a coin – that are lost by their owners, then missed eventually, then sought out, then found, then returned to make the original group complete again.

“Rather than the parable of the Lost Sheep, the same story might be called the parable of the “Initially Oblivious Owner,” says Levine.

She also points out that one might imagine the shepherd in our story as well as the woman with the coin to be among the wealthy, those who have much. It's actually hard to notice the loss of one sheep among a hundred, which is a good-sized flock. she points out. And the woman has 10 silver coins, an impressive amount, and she notices when she loses one of them. And she searches the house for it until it's found. Then she has the women's group over to celebrate.

As church we might be asking ourselves who we are in the story. Are we the 99 sheep, the 9 silver coins, or are we the people at Jesus' table who grumbled at Jesus' concern and fellowship with the troublemakers in the community?

If we are the latter, then perhaps we might ask if it is up to God to go out and find the ones who are separated from the community, or is it up to us?

Levine points out a subtle difference in the responsibility that is taken by the shepherd and the woman in Luke's story. The shepherd refers to his lamb as "my sheep that was lost." The woman refers to her silver as "the coin that I lost."

And Levine writes: "We can celebrate when what we have lost is found, but can we also admit our responsibility in the losing?"

Ouch Amy-Jill. And yet fair point. We know that communities of all faith traditions, St. Peter's included, have been losing membership for years. And we might blame the culture, or the wayward nature of parishioners, or the lure of sleeping in on Sunday morning, or kids these days. Of late we might blame the alienating effects of COVID, or the lure of online viewing over in-person attending.

But we also know plenty of stories of the unkind word, the argument with the pastor, the political fight, the act of prejudicial rejection that have shown the door to many a sheep. Even in that midrash about Moses, where Moses says "I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. You are so exhausted!" Levine point out the maybe a better shepherd would have noticed if his sheep weren't getting enough to drink.

The question is do we notice them when they're gone? Does anyone search them out? Do we rejoice when they return or accept the invitation back? Do we ask why they left in the first place, check to the see what is causing the initial thirst, or the exhaustion?

Now Levine points out this moment in the Gospel of Luke that could just let us all off the hook – that place in the Gospel where Luke has Jesus say "I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." It's an odd twist in the story, given that the neither the sheep nor the coin have much agency in how they got lost or whether they get found.

But I would say that people do have some agency over whether they want to be found. That doesn't not let us off the hook from searching, or from acknowledging that churches can drive people away. But it does acknowledge that when people return, it's because they want to. Sometimes we might hear "no" as the answer to our invitation. But oh the feeling when the answer is yes, or even we'll see.

This Rally Day marks are own point of return after Summer wandering and vacationing and relaxing. It's the day we energize our launch into a new year of programs and liturgy, new ministry and new commitment to tending one another in Jesus' flock. It's worth a party in park – perhaps we're catching

up with folks we haven't seen for awhile. We are rallying our enthusiasm for what comes next, in what promises to be a year of new beginnings.

So starting with this Rally Day, let's make this year one that seeks out the lost. Let's commit to making St. Peter's a body that looks around for the ones who we have not seen for awhile, that notices the ones who may be foundering for lack of a faith community, and let's invite them in. And let's have more parties and celebrations of who we are becoming because of who have newly walked through our doors. That's certainly worth throwing another veggie burger on the grill. Amen!