

Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son

Luke 15:3-32

October 6, 2019

First Presbyterian, Luling

It all started last March, when we started packing up things to make our house in Buda look attractive enough to sell. We started losing everything. Every other sentence started with “Do you know where....” It got progressively worse as we packed more and more boxes and stashed them in unlikely hiding spots. I held out hope that our life would return to its sort-of organized normal mess after we moved.

Moving made it even worse. We unpacked all those boxes and put things away in places that made sense at the time, if the unpacker was me. Or we unpacked all those boxes and put things away in places that were handy, if the unpacker was not me. So a few months later, when I went looking for the Tupperware container that holds the birthday cakes, it took me 10 minutes to find it way back in the corner of the kitchen cabinet. Now I know. At one point, we had lost Rachel’s tennis shoes that she needed for school, the first library book we had checked out of the Fayette County Library, and something else I can’t now remember. I’ve even lost Daisy twice, when she pulled the leash out of my hand going after deer. It feels like we’re in a “lost things” era in our family.

Lost-ness is what ties these three stories together in Luke’s gospel. The sheep is lost. The coin is lost. The son is lost. Or both sons are lost. It’s interesting to me, that when something is missing in someone else’s life, I might feel mild distress on their behalf. But when that missing thing belongs to me, then I’m prepared to, literally, take the couch apart to find it. When it is ours, or our responsibility, it’s terrible to have something missing. We look and look and look to find it. Its absence nags at us until we finally find it.

We’re going to look at the first two parables together, and then look at the last. Luke puts them together for a reason. Think about stories from your childhood, stories that you could tell by memory. They most likely follow what scholars call “The Rule of Three”: three little pigs, the three bears, even the parable of the Good Samaritan follows this pattern, which we’ll get to next week. In this pattern, two examples follow a similar outline, and the third example begins the same way but has some kind of twist or surprise ending. Except how much of a surprise can it be, when we’re expecting the third event to be different somehow, through years of reading and hearing Rule of Three stories.

In any case, the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin follow almost exactly the same outline. First, something is missing. The responsible party has to notice that something is missing. The sheep owner likely has to count, to make sure, because 100 things are harder to keep up with than ten things. He would have to count unless the missing sheep is one of his favorites, or a different color, or somehow distinguishable from all the other sheep.

When we were growing up, we would often visit my mom's relatives in the country, and one of our favorite things was when it was time to go check the cows. Sometimes we would get to drive the pickup, sometimes we'd get to toss the hay out of the truck, sometimes we would get to call them with the siren our great uncle had rigged in the truck. But every single time, he would make us count the cows. Every time. We understood that it was important to keep up with them and make sure none was missing, but it was almost impossible to count them. They would not stand still. One Hereford looks much the same as another, at least to us. We counted and counted and never ever, not once in my memory, did we ever come up with the correct number of cows. But my great-uncle, who was the owner of the cows, also counted, and he knew if one was missing, and looked in the little notebook he kept in the door pocket of the pickup, and he would figure out which one it was, and if she had had a calf yet, and if she'd also been missing the day before. He noticed when they were missing.

The woman with the ten coins, each coin worth a day's work, probably noticed more quickly that one was missing, because it's not as hard to keep up with ten coins as it is 100 sheep, both because it is fewer items, and coins tend to stay where you put them rather than wandering around.

Once the owners notice that one of their precious things is missing, they do exactly the same thing: look for it. And look. And look. The sheep owner leaving the 99 sheep behind has taken a considerable risk in doing so, the woman who left 9 coins in her bag less so. But they look for the lost thing as if it were the only thing they owned, as if it is of top importance.

And when they find the lost thing, sheep or coin, they do exactly the same thing, too: they call together their friends and neighbors and celebrate. There is one small difference: the sheep owner sounds like he blames the sheep for getting lost by using the passive, and the woman says instead "the coin that I had lost." She takes responsibility, where he does not. A sheep does have more possibility of getting lost of its own accord than a coin does, of course.

So they are the first examples for the Rule of Three: something is missing, its absence is noticed, the owner looks for it, finds it, and throws a party.

Then comes the story of what we usually call the Prodigal Son. Amy-Jill Levine, in her work on the parables, suggests that we have completely left out a huge chunk of possible interpretations of the parable, not that ones we have learned are wrong, but that there are more ways to look at it.

As we've categorized it in our heads, it's the similar structure. Sort of. There's a lost son, the one who demands his share of the inheritance and heads out to make his way in the world. There's not really a search for him, though. But when he comes back, there's a big party and celebration. And oh yeah, the older son, who gets mentioned as an afterthought, if at all.

Levine's idea is that it is the older son who is actually lost, all along. The younger son going off to make his way in the world is just the introduction to the story. It takes the younger son coming back, and the party, for the father to realize who is missing, that the older son is not celebrating but still out in the field. And then the father goes to look for him. And then...does the party continue? The parable doesn't tell us. The father is like the sheep owner in that he does not admit his own role in losing his son, or taking him for granted. He seems to realize that his older son has felt lost but doesn't have an awareness of his own role in that. He was focused on the son that left, rather than the one who had felt lost though he was close at hand.

Who is missing around here? Some, we know, and we know they're missing, and we fret about it. But today I'm wondering who is it that is missing that we don't even know are missing. Who is it that is so far off our radar, or maybe even so close to us, like the older son, that we don't know they aren't here? But how in the world do we know someone is missing if we don't know who they are or what we are missing?

Here's an example. I can't think of how many times I've studied this Prodigal Son passage. I know we've tackled it before, here, more than once. And every time we study it, one of you says something profound that makes me understand it in a deeper way. But that new-to-me thought is not one that I even knew I could be missing, because I'd never thought it before. In the chapter of the big book, Levine talks about how people around the world interpret this parable, specifically about how they interpret the younger son's getting into a pickle. People from well-off, developed countries: the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and South Africa, tend to say that the younger son got in such dire straits because of a combination of bad parenting, lack of community values, separating himself from

his network, and personal irresponsibility. I've heard some version of all of those ideas before. Russian readers tend to notice that there was a famine in the land, and there was simply no food, not just no food for him. Someone from Kenya suggested that the real problem was a lack of generosity—that no one shared food with him.¹ Neither of these interpretations are unfaithful to the biblical text, but I had not thought of either one. To place blame outside the younger son in one way or another had not crossed my mind. I didn't know that piece of interpretation was missing until I read it.

Likewise, we don't know who we are missing, whose interpretation and insight we are missing, until we go and seek them out. And we can't stop just at bringing someone in the doors. We need to make space to listen, even if they're going to say something very different from what we have thought for our whole lives. We have to realize they are missing, go and look for them, and make space for them to be a part of us—that's what the celebrations are for.

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. Short Stories by Jesus. This citation is on page 55, but the whole chapter has informed the sermon.