

Lent 4, The slow prayer of reconciliation and new creations¹
2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

This parable that's known as the Prodigal Son is familiar to us. And I imagine it ranks as one of our favorite. A popular understanding of this parable is that we are the younger son, the Pharisees and scribes are the older son, and the father is God. And what we love about it is that the father in the parable runs to the younger son, foolish and sinful that he is, and embraces him and throws a party. We shake our heads at the older brother, wondering why he can't loosen up and embrace his brother like their father did. But we forgive his harsh, judgmental ways as we bask in the glorious grace of the father.

Is that a fair summary of the parable's interpretation?

But parables, as we know, don't have simple meanings or single interpretations. What might we see and hear if we turn the parable, listening to it from another perspective?

I've been reading and listening to Amy-Jill Levine this week. She's a New Testament and Jewish Studies scholar at Vanderbilt. And she's Jewish. She has a different take on this parable. I confess, I love the familiar interpretation and found myself reluctant to receive her new one. (Of course, I/we don't have to choose one or the other. We can also have others!) But one of the things that's particularly compelling in Levine's work is her point that our Christian interpretation is anti-Semitic. The scribes and Pharisees—the Jews, the older brother—are wrong, again. And perhaps even hard-hearted, refusing to see God's love and grace while we—Gentiles and younger brother—we get it. Hebrew Scripture, Levine reminds her readers, is filled with images of a God who has much love and grace. Scribes and Pharisees would have known and understood that God's steadfast love and faithfulness

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt, informed and inspired this sermon. She's written much about this parable, including a children's book, *Who Counts?*

is always been waiting to embrace foolish and sinful children. When we only see them in a negative light, without compassion for their full humanity, it becomes anti-Semitic.

As I sat with Levine's reading of the Parable of the Lost Son (her title), I found myself being drawn into a new understanding. And a sense of seeing into the heart of God. Or, to say it another way, I had a sense of hearing God's longing, God's prayer. I don't know if God prays, but if prayer is about our conversations with God, about taking our needs and longings to God, then in The Parable of the Lost Son we hear a bit of God's conversation and longing through Jesus. We hear God's slow, patient prayer for us, humanity, for creation.

Let's take a look at the parable.

Jesus tells this parable in response to complaints from some Pharisees and scribes. Or, we could say that Jesus tells the parable in response to complaints from some ethnic Mennonites. They don't like the company that Jesus is keeping and they're concerned what that means for Mennonite Church USA. They want to be welcoming, but are also concerned about the integrity of the church.

Jesus hears their complaint and tells this parable. Actually, he tells three parables, and this is the third one. The first two set up the third one, so we have to start with the first two.

"How many of you," Jesus says, "if you had 100 sheep and lost one wouldn't go looking for that sheep? Of course you would! And when you find the sheep, you'll gather your friends and family and have a party, right?"

Let's make a note. A man with 100 sheep counts his sheep. That's how he knows there's one missing. He counted his sheep. He knew one was lost because he counted. And when there were again 100 sheep, then he celebrated.

And the second scenario: “Or what about a woman who had 10 coins? If she loses one, she’ll look for it until she finds it, right? And then she’ll do what we all would do, she’ll invite her friends and neighbors and celebrate.”

Like the man in the first parable, the woman counts. That’s how she knows if all of her coins are there or not. So when she counts only 9, she doesn’t stop looking until they are all once again in a safe place. Then she celebrates with her community.

This is the prelude to the third parable. Jesus begins the third parable: “There was a man who had two sons.” We’ve gone from 100 to 10 to 2. But this line, “There was a man with two sons,” cues Jesus’ audience. They’re familiar with stories of fathers with two sons. There’s Abraham with Ishmael and Isaac. There’s Esau and Jacob. And Jacob with 11 sons and Joseph. There are others, but these are perhaps the more familiar ones. And what is the dynamic in these father-with-two-sons stories? In each of these stories, there’s a tension and rivalry between the older and younger sons. The way the parents treat the sons sets up the conflict. But invariably the favor belongs to the younger son, from Abel to Isaac to Joseph. It is the younger son who is chosen. It is the younger son that carries the family lineage. It is the story of the younger son that is told from generation to generation. It is the name of the younger son that identifies a people, a tradition, a God.

And over time, through generations and millennia, we come to think that because God favors the one son, the younger son, and God is rejecting the older. We think that if God’s blessing falls on one son, then the other son must be cursed. We fall into this kind of binary thinking without being aware of it.

Back to the parable. When these faithful descendants of Jacob hear the opening words of this third parable, they’re set up to be sympathetic to the younger son. As Jesus tells the parable, his listeners are paying attention. Unlike Jesus’ audience, we’ve heard the story many

times and know it well: this younger son wastes his inheritance and when he's desperately hungry, he comes back home.

And here the Parable of the Lost Son takes a turn. Jesus changes the pattern. So we have to listen more carefully. The younger son came home on his own. Unlike the first two when the man and woman went looking for the lost, this father did not go searching.

But the son is home! The lost is found! So the father throws a party and invites everyone to come and celebrate with him. And they come to eat and drink and dance with the father.

But the father did not count.

The man has two sons. And only one son is at home. This man did not count his sons.

The older son comes home from the fields, but he refuses to be found by his father. It's a perfectly reasonable response to being forgotten. And when his father comes out to get him, he vents his anger. With bitter accusation he lists all the ways the father has favored his younger son and forgotten him, the faithful firstborn. He even refuses to claim the other son as his brother, calling him, "this son of *yours*."

As we listen to the older brother, we begin to hear the voices of all the older brothers through the generations. The forgotten brothers. The brothers the fathers forgot to count. We must hear their voices; we must see them.

To the forgotten brother, to the son the man forgot to count, the father says, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because *this brother of yours* was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

With this parable, Jesus has revealed the hunger and pain of siblings in conflict, a conflict that began years and years and years ago. The younger son and the older son each have their pain carried through time. With their pain, they carry their interpretations of their stories. And they will pass it on to their children. And their children's children.

Jesus is interrupting the stories. And the interpretations. He's interrupting our stories and our interpretations. The scribes and Pharisees and the sinners and tax collectors are siblings. We hear the deep longing and compassion in this parable for these long lost and estranged siblings to reconcile.

God doesn't forget to count. It is we who forget to count. We don't mean to forget. The Pharisees and scribes have been living as faithfully as they know how to live. Just as we do our best to live faithfully into our inheritance as God's children. This reading of the Parable of the Lost Son reveals some of our blind spots, some of the ways that we've handed on our stories and traditions that fail to count *all* of God's children. Like the man with the 100 sheep, God counts His creatures. Like the woman with the 10 coins, God counts each of Her precious children.

God hasn't lost us. God doesn't lose His children. It is we who lose each other. It is we who stop seeing some of our siblings, especially the foolish sinners. In this parable we hear God's deep longing for reconciliation. God *loves* the faithful Pharisees and scribes. God loves the sinners and tax collectors. God loves the older son, the younger son, the middle daughter. God's love for and embrace of one person will never diminish God's love for another person. Our estrangement from each other—no matter what the circumstances of that estrangement are—is a mistake. God's deep desire and prayer is for us to be reconciled, because God's inheritance is for *all* of Her children, equally, without exception. And when there's a party because a foolish sinner has returned home, it does not and will never diminish the inheritance of those who have been at home the whole time.

We hear echoes of this parable in Paul's words. The human point of view is to be in rivalry, lost and estranged from each other. But Paul writes, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a

human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

It isn't just the individual or the reconciled siblings who are new creations. Paul stretches our imagination. Reconciliation is a big, cosmic deal: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a *new creation*.”

This is such a good parable for Lent. We need it as we journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. This parable opens our eyes to see that all along the way, Jesus is counting. He's counting his siblings. He's searching and finding lost siblings, reconciling them to himself, reconciling them with their Creator, and their inheritance. And when Jesus stands listening to the crowds shouting, “Crucify him!” he recognizes the foolish, younger brothers, squandering their inheritance. Jesus sees the angry older siblings, demanding their justice. And Jesus is counting them. All of them. With deep love, with much mercy, with extravagant forgiveness.

Jesus shares God's deep longing for reconciliation and new creations. And from that deep longing he prays as he counts. Jesus knows and trusts that even though he will be killed—killed by God's beloved children—his death won't change or diminish his inheritance. Our inheritance from God is eternal.

It is with this deep faith, with this practiced prayer that Jesus is able to stand, to keep standing. And to keep looking for and finding and counting God's children. He was, and is, reconciling siblings, seeing all of them, seeing all of us, in his living and in his dying.

And through God the Holy Spirit, in our deep longing and in our practiced prayers, this reconciliation continues in the world.

May we learn to count with God, with Jesus, counting *all* of our siblings.

May we be reconciled to one another.

May we celebrate when lost ones are found.

And may we know the embrace of our loving and gracious God, whose prayer and deepest longing is for reconciliation and new creations.