

Parable. It's a word we hear over and over again in scripture because Jesus used parables as a teaching tool, a way to draw pictures in his listeners' minds' eyes to help them better understand what the Kingdom of God was like. I know a few of you hate parables because you've told me as much. You would rather just get the message straight up. If you'd like to leave now, we won't hold it against you because truthfully, there are probably a lot of us who wish Jesus would have been a bit more of a straight shooter, not leaving us with this legacy of ambiguity and wondering when it comes to some of the most important lessons in scripture. But, as Amy Jill Levine, Jewish scholar and author of *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* explains "Reducing parables to a single meaning destroys their aesthetic as well as ethical potential." Jesus' use of parables, while frustrating, was brilliant as it allows various windows of meaning to be opened on the stories depending on the cultural, political, spiritual, and economic conditions in which they are presented. Perhaps that is why they still demand our attention and imagination two thousand years later.

Merriam-Webster defines a parable as "a usually fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle." Tomes have been written about the meaning of the various parables, it's easier to make sense of some of them than it is others. Thankfully, this morning's parables from Luke's gospel aren't among the more obtuse in scripture.

This morning's text contains two parables that may be familiar to some of you. They are commonly known as the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. The two parables have a similar structure—something is lost, someone searches for it, it is found, the one who finds it calls friends and neighbors to celebrate that the lost thing has been located, and there is joy in heaven that it has been found. Lois Malcom, professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, writes the following about these stories . . . "The shepherd and the woman in these stories evoke images of a God who not only actively seeks out individuals who are lost . . . but also rejoices when they are found. This God is not a tyrant who demands subservience to impossible demands, but rather a God who actively seeks restoration: "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6; Psalm 86; etc.)

This is good news, especially for the times when we feel like we are lost on our own spiritual journey. Perhaps a grim health diagnosis leaves us wondering about the nature of God. Or, a natural disaster leaves us perplexed about the will of God. Or, we're so lost in our own sin that we think we are beyond redemption. The good news is that even if we're about ready to give up on God, God never gives up on us and will continue to search for us and will eventually find us and guide us home. And in those moments, when we are reminded of God's unconditional love and deep desire for relationship with us, we join our voices with the millions of others singing "I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see." The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin are stories that bring hope and reassurance, necessary reminders that all of us are wanted and welcome in the Kingdom of God.

But, while these parables offer truth about the Good News of God's mercy, I think they fit with Merriam-Webster's definition of a parable being "usually fictitious" when it comes to all of the details found within them being true, as in they actually happened. I don't think these parables are based on something that actually happened. My assumption about this is based on what might seem like a rather insignificant sentence in the story line. And Jesus said, "*Just so, 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.*"

This parable is obviously a work of fiction because where on earth would anyone find *ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance*. Now please don't misunderstand. I'm not of the mind that we are, as the

Psalmist and later John Calvin and other reformers suggested only “lowly worms.” I don’t think that people are essentially bad. I find the doctrine of total depravity which suggests “that human nature is thoroughly corrupt and sinful” to be total bunk. I know too many good people who do amazing things to believe otherwise. It’s not my style to offer up hellfire and brimstone sermons (though I should probably find more occasions to pound the pulpit to make sure you stay awake), nor do I wish to convince, as early American preacher Jonathan Edwards might have, that we are all sinners in the hands of an angry God.

And yet, I do believe there is great value in acknowledging our sin—especially when sin is defined as broken relationship with God, other, or self. If we don’t stop to think about the ways in which we’ve been unfaithful to God and others and ourselves, it’s unlikely we’ll stop being that way. Confessing our sin is not only cathartic, it is sanctifying, it purifies us and engages us in holy activity—it nurtures that which God seeks from us—relationship.

Additionally, when we acknowledge that we are sinful, that we disappoint others and ourselves, that we fall short of the glory of God, that we are sometimes wrong when we would have sworn we were right, and that there are times when we are more interested in being right for ego’s sake than we are in being kind for God’s sake, there’s a better chance, that when we acknowledge these things to be true for our own selves, we will expect and accept that others are the same way. Mind you, not that we condone sinful behavior in ourselves or others, but rather that we understand that most of us are trying to do our best with what we have and sometimes that’s not good enough. And so it is that hurtful things are said, careless actions are taken, greed corrupts, and fear distracts. And when we realize that these things are a reality for all of us, I believe we become more forgiving, more empathetic, and are able to walk more humbly with the Lord.

I do not believe we are all sinners in the hands of an angry God. I believe we are sinners in the hands of a God who forgives us, loves us, and wants our love. I believe we get lost and when we do, God seeks us out. I believe we mess up and when we do, God forgives us. I believe we fall short of the glory of God and when we do, God’s light shines on us anyhow. And so it is that the least we can do, in the face of such amazing grace, is to extend that grace to others, seeking them out when they are lost, forgiving them when they do us wrong, and letting the light of Christ shine through us to brighten their way.

After all . . .

There is so much good in the worst of us,
 And so much bad in the best of us,
 That it hardly becomes any of us,
 To talk about the rest of us.

-Edward Wallace Hoch