

When I am asked to plan funerals, there is no hymn more frequently requested than “Amazing Grace,” and I think it’s largely due to that phrase in the first verse which sums things up so nicely: *“I once was lost but now am found.”* It’s very powerful, and it touches our hearts. And that’s clearly the main thing on Jesus’ mind, as well as that of Luke, in today’s gospel passage: *things lost and found again*; and a message of hope for outcasts, the marginalized and the questionable --- a primary focus in Luke. Two very short parables, but ones which achieve a rhetorical effect and leave us with evidence of the basic thrust of the teaching of Jesus. Both parables here “are part of an attempt to persuade Jesus’ critics that *seeking out sinners is God’s plan...*and are a prelude to the extended drama of the Prodigal Son.”

And it is all prompted by the behavior Jesus modeled which angered the Pharisees, scribes and other religious leaders of the time. He was associating with toll or tax collectors and sinners. In fact, “Jesus’ companionship with sinners is a special point of emphasis” in Luke. He seems to recognize that the normal human reaction to this kind of behavior is to ask: *“can God truly care about these people?!”* But that’s the whole point, isn’t it? God doesn’t leave *anyone* out.

Sinners refers to those who were not careful in their observance of ceremonial duties (particularly religious ones), people engaged in immoral behavior, or – frankly – all those who did not take their religion as seriously as did the Pharisees. If, in addition, they had regular business or personal relationships with Gentiles, they were considered unclean.

Toll or tax collectors were seen as particularly despicable in the first century because they were raising revenues for King Herod and the Romans --- the occupiers of the homeland and the collaborators who helped them keep their grip on the conquered people. The Romans used a “tax farming” system in which collectors would bid for the right to collect taxes in an area, then “farmed out” the job itself to underlings, with the result that both groups overcharged those who were taxed and, in this unregulated way, supplemented their own “take” or profit. In other words, it was the worst kind of tax system in that it shifted

the entire burden of taxation onto the poorest and least able to pay and encouraged graft and corruption.

Who Jesus associated with just kept getting him into trouble, but it was also making a point which could only have been done in this open way of challenging rather than accepting certain rules of behavior. Of the four major thrusts of the teaching of Jesus --- (a) *celebration*, (b) *compassion*, (c) *the restoration of Israel*, and (d) *the kingdom of God*--- here Luke concentrates on the first two: *celebration* and *compassion*.

But perhaps the most important issue raised here is how we perceive God. This is because how we see the nature of God determines how we see ourselves and others, how we should think and act, and how the world *ought to be*. Think about that for a moment. How do we see God? Is he loving or harsh? Is he more focused on pardon or repentance? For whom does he actually care? Because our answers to these questions will surely determine *how we ourselves act*.

Recall that in the Old Testament the Jewish people were often reminded of how the God of Israel had rescued them from captivity in Egypt. Because they had known what it felt like to be abused, belittled and held against their will, they were reminded that this was not the way they should behave toward outsiders and foreigners. So, the very basis of their standards of ethical behavior could be traced back to the example of the attitude and behavior of their God toward people who are being exploited. In the same way, here by way of parables we are reminded that our behavior should flow from the example of God himself. "If God is a seeking, caring God, then his grace should characterize our self-perception and our treatment of others.

This is a simple truth but also a profound one and one which is very difficult to internalize, so one of the best ways to demonstrate it is to put it into the form of a story or a word-picture. As humans we are uniquely affected by narratives that convey truths about what our behavior should be like. A story teaches this better than a lecture or an admonishment. The narrative itself is what we internalize and thus ultimately act upon, in part because we can remember stories better than we do expository writing or speaking. And these two short parables remind us that God cares for those who have been marginalized just as he cares for those who are experiencing elevated positions in society. *No one* is left out of the kingdom of God.

In the parable of the *Lost Sheep*, Jesus uses a very familiar tradition in Palestine, shepherding. The shepherd notices one sheep missing and goes looking for it, finds it and celebrates upon its rediscovery. “Jesus asserts that the promised activity of God to shepherd his own people was taking place (in his own time). Further, with the parable he showed those complaining about his actions that their attitude did not match the character and desires of God, and in effect, invite(d) them to join in the kingdom celebration of the forgiveness being dispensed.” The Lucan text emphasizes “the value of repentance, and repentance is a necessary and ongoing task for all of us...(while) the whole of Scripture underscores that God is the one who takes the initiative. Any action humans take is a response to the grace of God. Scripture also insists that humans do indeed act...(but) ultimately there is a huge difference between responding to the grace of God and trying to make oneself look right.

The parable of the *Lost Coin* does not have the same resonance with the Old Testament as the one focused on sheep and shepherds, but “its picture of God diligently searching is poignant.” A woman has 10 silver coins and misplaces one. Such a coin would have been worth approximately one day’s wages at the time. In any event, it represented a very large amount for the woman in question because she did not have much. After sweeping and then using a lamp, she is able to find it again. She celebrates and invites her neighbors to share her joy. If this is the character of God, it should also be ours. The image of the woman, though it is not the heart of the story, “reminds us of Jesus’ valuing of women.” Throughout his journey toward Jerusalem we find several examples of “women as hosts, as hearers of God’s word.” And this tells us a lot about God. “The way women are treated in our homes, churches, and society and the way we seek justice for women should be expressions of the limitless grace of God’s kingdom.”

What was Jesus’ attitude about repentance? Well, it differed from that of his critics. His enemies tended to believe that “nothing short of adopting their standards of purity and law-observance would do. For Jesus, when people follow him and his way that is the true repentance.” This focus on repentance reminds us of the Jewish belief that the two halves of God’s creation, heaven and earth, were meant to fit together and be in harmony with each other.” And plainly, in the world as we know it, this is certainly not true. The point of

praying that God's kingdom "will come 'on earth as in heaven' is that if you know what is going on in heaven, you will know what is supposed to be true on earth.

The Pharisees believed that the closest one could get to heaven was in the Temple; the Temple required strict purity from the priests; and the closest that non-priests could get to copying heaven was to maintain a similarly strict purity in every aspect of life. They found it impossible to understand how and why Jesus was throwing a great, noisy party every time a single sinner saw the light and began to follow God's way." But Scripture tells us that "God rejoices more over the one repentant sinner than a crowd of righteous persons who did not need repentance." And joy is a key ingredient in Luke's description of *the way of Jesus* that we are to emulate.

The parables also warrant our attention because of this clear focus on joy. After all, this ought rightly to be the "true mark of Christianity" because this is what we learn about our God's character and attitude --- that of someone who seeks and celebrates recovery."

Both stories "conclude with celebration," but they are simply extensions of the message of Luke's gospel in general: "(throughout) the mood of rejoicing and praising God dominates the infancy stories and continues to be the response of individuals or crowds...(and) it is the proper response to miracles." However, we also see in Luke how quickly that joy can "turn...to violence." Since this message of celebration permeates Luke's account, we need to take it seriously as part of the message of the early church about the nature of the God they worshipped. And this is the principal lesson we should take away from these two powerful parables.

Amen.

(Sources: N. T. Wright, Luke for Everyone, London, SPCK, 2001; Klyne R. Snodgrass, Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K., 2008; Ralph F. Wilson, "Parables of the Lost Sheep and Coin," www.jesuswalk.com/luke; Greg Carey, "Commentary on Luke 15: 1-10," www.workingpreacher.org; PHEME PERKINS, Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids and Cambridge, U.K., 2007)