

“The Problem With Parables”

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Matthew 18: 1-14

As most of you know I love stories and I especially love the stories and parables that Jesus tells. He was a master storyteller. The parables that were read this morning are normally called stories of grace by preachers. These stories focus on the growth of our understanding of our image of God. That is God as the Creator of all life. God as the foundation for the entire universe. These stories this morning are a good way to understand that God's unstoppable goodness is indeed the foundation for all life and all theology, no matter which faith tradition you belong in.

We have to be careful when we automatically assume we understand these stories. Both the story of the good shepherd and the story of the good housewife have a sharp bite to them.

The less you know the easier it is to understand these stories. Let me repeat that. That is rather a disturbing statement. Sometimes we assume we have heard these stories so many times, we know them backward and forward and we don't get the sharp bite.

The people living in Galilee in the first century would have heard these stories so differently than we do. These stories may seem simple to us because we are ignorant of some basic ordinary simple facts of life.

My father was a turkey farmer. I often heard him come home and complain how stupid turkeys were. If they heard thunder they would get scared and all huddle together until many of them suffocated to death. Sheep aren't really any smarter. Now I know that almost all of us have grown up with images in our heads of sweet innocent little lambs. I know I did.

Most preachers talk about what a good person the shepherd was in Jesus' parable. The shepherd is willing to exert so much effort for one lost sheep. Now if any of us knew anything about herding sheep, we wouldn't say things like that. The people in Galilee know sheep up close. Sheep are not sweet. It doesn't matter if they are innocent or not, they are still animals. They are rude, insistent, and deeply stupid animals. They would rather try to walk through a fence than go around it. They will destroy the pasture if they are not driven off of it. Unlike cattle, they will devour the grass, down to and including the roots, and make a wasteland of what had been flourishing pasture. And I understand that if you allow sheep to gorge on alfalfa, they will keep on eating until they are so bloated that they die. They will never quit.

The worst thing is when kids raised in town become preachers; they always stand up in the pulpit and say God is like a shepherd. I know I've done it myself. But anyone who knew anything about sheep at all would think that comparing God to a shepherd is quite a sharp insult to God.

Jesus asks the question, “Which one of you who has a hundred sheep and loses one wouldn’t leave ninety nine sheep alone in the wilderness and go searching for the one who wandered off?” The preacher then goes on to say how God is like that good and tender shepherd.

Here is the problem in this story, If you leave 99 stupid sheep in the wilderness and go searching for one lost sheep, how many sheep will you find when you get back? If you were raised in a town or even if your father owned turkeys, you might think this is a math problem and the answer is 100. However, people who know sheep know that the answer is likely to be somewhat less than 100. In fact those with long experience of sheep are more apt to think that the answer to Jesus’ question, how many sheep will you have left, is that at the end of the story the shepherd will have only one sheep.

This is indeed a problem with this story. Indeed all of Jesus stories and parables have problems with them. Until you catch on to the story problem you will misunderstand the story. When Jesus first set this story before the people of Galilee, the people of Galilee knew sheep. Everyone in the crowd knew how to answer the question. “Which one of you would leave 99 stupid sheep alone in the wilderness to go on a fool’s errand searching for a single stray?” The crowd will have answered with one voice “No one in his right mind would leave 99 perfectly good sheep just to hunt for one stray who apparently lacks the genetically determined instinct to bunch up and form a herd.” Everyone in the crowd would have known that. Now you understand the story problem.

Remember the woman who lost her coin in Luke’s gospel? This is a similar story. In Luke 15: 3-7 The woman and the coin? Interpreters of this story have made up all kinds of excuses for this woman’s excessive actions. They say things like, well maybe the coin was part of her dowry. Maybe it is like a coin worn by nomad women in the area as part of a woman’s traditional head ornamentation. Or maybe the woman is exceedingly poor. Well these are possibilities, but the story says nothing about her poverty and nothing about her dowry. A silver coin was worth about a day’s wages back then. In the story there is just the woman, the coin and household turned upside down. If we think about a traditional woman’s work in the first century of Galilee, before washing machine, and dishwashers and ovens and refrigerators, you will remember that a woman’s’ load of work per day was very heavy and if she spent all day looking for a lost coin, her family would no doubt go hungry that night. Even if she is searching for something precious, she has disrupted an entire world in her searching. Think of it like this, which one of us would stay home to look for our misplaced wedding photos during the busiest work week of the year, say the auditors are coming? Your answer would be that no one who cared whether or not they had a job the next day would do such a thing.

Well, now we have two strange stories. First we should let them be strange they are strange. Next we should notice that they are both strange stories in lots of ways. They’re both stories about excessive hunting for something that is lost.

If they are to be taken as stories about how God refuses to surrender any part of creation, no matter what the cost, they are both comforting and deeply disturbing at the same time. They are comforting if we happen to be the part of creation that God insist on honoring and protecting. They are disturbing if God had decide to honor and protect people we know are not worth the effort.

When the newspaper runs a story detailing the cost of war they often list the casualties, the names of our soldiers who have died on foreign shores. The list will never include the names of the civilian casualties who have died from the bombs. “Oh well, it’s a shame,” we tell ourselves, “but you can’t avoid collateral damage in war.” Well this is a true enough statement. But if Jesus’ story problems present a picture of a God who is excessively concerned about every part of creation, these stories will be troublesome.

And that is not the end of the trouble. If these stories are stories about God, notice who gets to play the role of God. First it’s a shepherd. Shepherds were outcast in first century Galilee. They were scorned because they smelled like sheep. Have you ever smelled wet sheep? Probably an experience that we could all give a miss. And shepherds were viewed as being rootless and untrustworthy, and as a result were not allowed to testify in court cases. They could not swear a legal oath nor could they vouch for anyone’s good character. So how exactly is Jesus implying that God is like a shepherd?

Or on the other hand, God could be like a woman. It always surprises me that people seem to notice every time a masculine image is used for God in the Bible, but miss all the feminine images. God being God is surely above all gender and beyond human definition. I do know people who will argue seriously that God is a male. They say look it is right in the Bible. Then they quote passages about God as a warrior, or God as a king, but they forget about all the passages where the image of God is a mother. God as a nursing mother and God as a hen gathering her chicks under her wings. And today we have God as a woman who turns her household upside down to find something lost.

Maybe the best thing we can do with these story problems is just let them be. These stories make us think whether we really believe anything we say about grace and forgiveness. These stories are not simple. They create a problem for us. Grace is a problem for us not a simple solution. Think about the problem the next time you see a baby baptized or the next time you receive communion. These are stories and these are problems and out of these story problems God speaks to us, but only if we don’t pretend that God likes ignorance better than knowledge.