

A few weeks ago, a mother with 4 young children – a widow since February – posted this poignant status update on Facebook: “I have been wearing Scott’s wedding ring since Valentine’s Day. His fingers were long, but thin... so it fit on my left middle finger, right next to the rings he placed on my finger [when we married]. His ring slid around a bit, and when I was really cold it threatened to slip off, but I’ve kept it on since the day we said our goodbyes.

Today I was pulling weeds and wearing garden gloves, because the last time I did this I did not wear gloves and I sliced my fingers but good. Our son Charlie toddled after me, and as we rounded the house and came in sight of his new swing, he wanted to get in. By this time the gloves were soaked and filthy, so I took them off to lift Charlie into the swing. After a few minutes, I glanced down and saw it.

A naked finger.

I don’t know when the ring came off. I assume it was when I removed the glove. But it’s not in the glove, and I couldn’t find it after a careful search around the swing set. I can’t even be 100% sure it was on my finger when I put the gloves on, though I think it was. When did I last notice it? I cannot say for sure. I was already so used to it that I did not often take note of it, until suddenly, it wasn’t there.

[While] I am dismayed, I know two important things: First, the ring is not Scott, and it is not my memories, and it is not our love; if it’s lost, it is an object that’s lost, but it’s not the most important thing. I have the most important things, and those cannot be lost. Second, God knows and sees where the ring is, and God knows my heart’s desire is to have the [ring] as a reminder of the things I cannot lose. I am praying that it will be found. I wouldn’t mind if you join your prayers with mine.”

Is there anyone among us would not search as earnestly as we could for a wedding ring lost under these circumstances? Perhaps, because we’re in June - wedding season - that story is especially moving; and perhaps all the more because Jen and I celebrated our 23rd anniversary this week.

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With this story of the naked finger, we launch into a new worship series on the theme: *Story Formed: Parables of Grace*. Over the next 7 Sundays we’ll look at several parables of Jesus; brief stories which Jesus told on the theme of God’s amazing grace.

Grace. The unearned, unmerited, undeserved favor of God. Jesus told many parables, and so we’ll be

focusing on parables Jesus told in order to teach his disciples about the boundless love of God that cannot be gained by any effort on our part.

We begin today in Luke 15:1-10, where Jesus tells two parables; one about a shepherd with 100 sheep, and the other about a woman with 10 silver coins. (A third ‘lost and found’ parable follows right after these two, but we’ll get to that one, the Parable of the Prodigal, in a few weeks.) However, according to the first two parables, both the shepherd and the woman come up short in their accounting one afternoon. When they last had those items, they can’t say for sure. But like a cherished wedding ring, they suddenly realize they’ve lost something of value and so they drop everything to search for 1 lost sheep and 1 silver coin. In the end, both the shepherd and the woman throw extravagant parties to celebrate when these lost items are recovered.

Two very simple – and very similar – stories, right? But Jesus’ parables, though they can be both short and simple, are rarely so. Indeed, as well see in this series, Jesus’ parables are inexhaustibly rich.

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Before we unpack these parables (and the other parables we’ll look at in this series), we should know that the author of this Gospel, Luke, was not present when Jesus told these stories. He wasn’t there taking dictation. And how do we know this? Because Luke tells us so at the beginning of the Gospel! These are the first 3 verses of Luke: “*Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account...*”

Luke is telling us that he’s not an eyewitness and that he’s using other sources to compose his Gospel. This may explain why neither the Parable of the Lost Coin, nor the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is included in the other Gospels. Since he wasn’t an eyewitness, Luke is using other accounts of Jesus’ life to write his own ‘orderly’ gospel. But for biblical scholars, this raises a question: where did these parables come from? Maybe they were retold to Luke by an eyewitness, or maybe it was from another written source. We can’t know for sure because Luke does not include footnotes to identify his sources! What Luke does tell us is that he did not get these stories firsthand.

Now, the Parable of the Lost Sheep is also in the Gospel of Matthew, and it sounds almost identical to Luke’s version. Here’s Matthew 18:12-14:
“*[Jesus said] What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountain and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.*”

They sound similar, right but there are 2 major differences between Matthew and Luke. First, while the shepherd rejoices in Matthew’s version, he doesn’t throw a party, as Luke’s version says. Second, Matthew does not include the interpretation of the parable that we read in Luke 15:7 (and again in v. 10): “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents...” etc...

These two facts, that Luke was not an eyewitness, and that Matthew’s version is different -- together with other textual clues -- lead Bible scholars to wonder if vv. 7 & 10 were part of the original parables, or if these interpretative verses were somehow added later?

Which makes sense, when you think about it, because when it comes to repentance, just how does a sheep or coin ‘repent’? The act of repentance requires a turning towards God, but can a sheep or coin do that? The act of repentance typically includes remorse. But neither sheep nor coin can they feel remorse, and neither can they promise not to get lost again. Like a lost wedding ring, the sheep and coin were just lost!

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So where does that leave us if we focus on the actual parables and not the interpretive verses?

In both stories, the focus is clearly on the ones who are doing the searching and the finding. The shepherd and the woman. The emphasis is on the determination and commitment of the shepherd and the woman to seek and find what is lost. And who is it, according to Gospel’s, that is most determined to seek and find what is lost? Who is it, that goes ‘all the way’ to hell to seek and save the lost? God incarnate in Christ Jesus!

Jesus is telling these parables to illustrate his determination – God’s determination – to find ‘the lost’ no matter how they became lost. And this

makes even more sense when we recall why Jesus told these two parables. According to Luke, Jesus tells these parables because the religiously upright (I meant ‘religious upright’!), the Pharisees and the scribes, are angry that Jesus is regularly dining with the wrong types of people: tax collectors and sinners! The religious folks see themselves on one side, upholding orthodoxy and righteousness, while Jesus’ behaviors seem to give tacit approval to the those on ‘the other side’ – the unrighteous.

As one theologian observes, it is unlikely that Jesus ever thought of himself as dining with sinners. More likely he was just dining with people God was madly in love with. But “the Pharisees and scribes see him as going to the other side [even as Jesus] sees himself as bringing the two sides together. [Jesus] was a man of reconciliation in a world that has accepted, and even gloried in, division. [Jesus] was struggling to put things back together that other people struggle to keep apart. [Jesus] sees himself as seeking the lost [and] inviting everyone to a communal feast of rejoicing.”¹ And the only people who are not included at the communal feast of rejoicing are those who refuse to sit at the table with certain ‘other’ people they believe shouldn’t there!

Friends, after studying these parables closely, the main thing we need to know is that these parables are not about the ‘unchurched’. They are about us! Just as Jesus is cautioning the Pharisees and scribes, we too need to be careful about separating and dividing grace in a way that excludes those who God is madly in love with.

Based on these parables, I suspect that churches which are being faithful to Jesus’ message and ministry will most likely be those where people look through the doors or windows and in great consternation ask, ‘What in God’s name are they doing letting those people into the church?’ and “How in God’s name are they allowing those people to share in communion?”

Some people just can’t bear the thought that God’s grace is as expansive and extravagant as Jesus tells us it is. They’d rather earn their way to redemption. It is to these ‘lost’ ones that Jesus tells these parables. Amen.

¹ Shea, John. *The Relentless Widow: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*. (Collegeville, Minnesota. Liturgical Press. 1992) 257-258