

I was struck by a comment I heard this week during an inter-religious conference, that we see what we are trained to see. The conference speaker is a Jewish Rabbi, born and raised in America, who immigrated to Israel as a young man. He said he was raised to see Palestinians as enemies, but he went through a radical transformation upon meeting and talking with his Palestinian neighbours. He went from seeing them as only dangerous enemies to seeing their humanity and feeling called to work together for peace. It was a moving story. A very raw reality that offered no easy answers, but the message that we “see what we are trained to see” really got me thinking. This man went from being trained to see enemies to learning to see human beings. The better the training, the better he could see.

In my early university days I spent some time with professional wildlife biologists. They sort of said the same thing. The more you look for something, the more you will see it. If you are a bird watcher you know this to be true. It counts for all sorts of wildlife spotting, the more you look for wild animals during your travels, the more you will see. The better you are trained to see or the more often that you watch for something, the more likely you are to see it.

Amy-Jill Levine’s book called “Short Stories by Jesus” challenges those of us who’ve been trained to see the Christian faith as a stark contrast to negative and false stereotypes of Jesus’ Jewish context. Her book about the parables of Jesus unpacks the Jewish context of Jesus’ early listeners and brings a broader understanding of what kind of connections his first disciples would have made as they learned to see his view of God’s Kingdom. I think Levine would agree that we see what we are trained to see.

So much of Jesus’ ministry among his disciples was training them to see. To see the nature of God’s Kingdom, to see God’s grace at work around them, to see opportunity for repentance, redemption and reconciliation. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are full of stories of how the disciples were trained to see by Jesus Christ. One of the best ways Jesus taught people to recognize the nature of the Kingdom of God is through his parables. Jesus’ parables are considered to be his most reliably retained teachings, as they were pithy narratives with surprise twists that made them memorable and easy to repeat.

Jesus’ parables invite us in to explore an image or a story and mine it for the richness of truth that only a strange twist can bring forth. Parables are not literal and they are not allegorical (where one assigns each part of the parable to different aspects or characters of a real-life situation). Parables are meant to open up mystery, not narrow in on singular meanings. They are a treasure of possibilities, with layers of new learning made available with each reading. A great parable will resist easy explanation and inspire deep questions, it will train us to see our world and ourselves differently. When it comes to the Kingdom of God, we see what we are trained to see, and Christ’s parables train us to see God’s Kingdom.

Luke’s gospel presents three “lost and found” parables together and places these in the context of repentance and forgiveness. Repentance and forgiveness have a lot to do with the nature of God’s Kingdom. The powerful effect of our repentance and the surprising grace of God’s forgiveness certainly deserve parable-like attention. In Luke’s telling of the gospel Jesus gives the teaching of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son as examples of times when human beings celebrated the finding of something lost, the conclusion being how much more might God rejoice at our decisions to repent and thereby be found, or how much more diligently might God search us out? Lovely.

No doubt God rejoices with each person who turns toward Jesus, desiring a relationship! But let’s not stop there. Any good parable bears some investigation. Find what is strange about the parable, for it is in the unexpected, that you unlock the treasure. Amy-Jill Levine suggests that what is strange about the parable of the lost sheep is that the shepherd notices one out of a hundred sheep is missing in the first place. Think about it, she

says, is it reasonable that if one hundred sheep were grazing on the hillside before you, you would be able to tell that one was missing? How would you even count them as they slowly milled about?

She asks the same about the woman and her missing coin. Can you readily differentiate between nine or ten coins in a pile or in a purse? Not without purposefully counting them. Do you notice what is missing when you have so much? Levine says, “Perhaps it is those who “have” who are more likely to fail to notice what is missing.”¹ If the shepherd “... can notice the missing one (percent) and diligently seek to find it, he reminds listeners that perhaps they have lost something, or someone, as well, but have not noticed it. Before the search can begin, we need to notice what, or who, is not there.”² Perhaps noticing what is missing or lost is the prerequisite to full reconciliation.

The woman with the ten silver coins has a home, a decent amount of money and lots of friends to invite over for a celebration. She is not a sad figure, but actually a well-off figure. In the ears of the first listeners, she has plenty, but if she weren’t keeping track of what she had, the fullness of what resources were available to her, she would have easily overlooked her loss. What a waste that would be! Here Levine points out an increased focus on responsibility for the loss. We are told the sheep was lost (we can imagine it wandering off without the shepherd noticing at first), but the woman states that SHE lost the coin, she admits responsibility for the loss and goes looking. Levine says “We can celebrate when what we have lost is found, but can we also admit our responsibility in the losing?”³

Who in our church, in our local congregation is missing? Who is missing simply because we have not cared to go looking for them, or refused to make room for them? Can we let these parables train us to see our own communities of faith differently? One might say that in the height of Christendom we could afford to ignore some people and leave them out, because who would even notice with our overflowing pews and packed Sunday schools? Alas, who was missing was likely the least among us, the most vulnerable, easily discouraged or trampled upon, labeled as other or even as enemy. What repentance is Christ calling the church to when it comes to turning a blind eye to the lost and overlooked?

Levine suggests that the “folkloric rule of three” is at work in Luke’s presentation of the three lost parables, with the first two parables being similar in order to highlight the difference in the third parable (think three little pigs, first two building houses out of straw and sticks, third pig with house of brick). Same, but different. Two parables where, despite all odds, what is lost is clearly recognized by the main character, the lost is searched for, found and celebrated. But the “themes of loss, search, completion and joy”⁴ play out differently in the lost son parable. We only see what we are trained to see.

What is lost and is the lost recognized? Levine suggests that the prodigal son title to this parable points readers in the wrong direction. Yes, we get a story of a son who goes off and comes back and he is the definition of prodigal – wasteful and squandering. But he isn’t searched for, he runs out of money and comes back because he is starving. There is the wealth, the inheritance that is squandered by the younger irresponsible son, certainly a big loss, but it is not recovered, it stays lost. The father is similar to the shepherd and the woman with ten coins, the father has plenty. He has enough that even after giving his youngest son his inheritance, he still has multiple robes and accessories and a fatted calf. What is different here from the first two parables is that the loss of the eldest son is not recognized by the father until the end, after the party has already started.

¹ *Short Stories by Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine, p 38.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 47.

⁴ Ibid.

The listeners of this parable would expect the younger son to be an underdog hero type like in so many other biblical stories (think David, youngest of seven, chosen to be king; Isaac, youngest son of Abraham, elevated in leadership of the Israelites; Joseph the youngest son growing to great power and wealth despite his brothers' efforts to despatch him, the list goes on!) ... while the younger son comes back, he is not a hero, he is not an underdog deserving of admiration. Early listeners of Jesus parable of the lost son would have been primed to cheer for the younger son, to expect his triumph.⁵ Instead, the younger son behaves despicably, his rehearsed confession to his father is suspiciously self-serving and he stops short of asking forgiveness – we are not truly convinced the younger son is repentant, rather that he is simply regretful that his extravagant lifestyle has come to an end.

But the older son, having been steadfastly committed and responsible, is overlooked and may as well have gone missing a long time ago. A treasure of relational devotion, lost to a father who was so busy watching for his younger son, he missed the goodness and dedication of his elder son. We don't get a satisfying resolution to this parable. Levine says, "In the first two parables, feasting and rejoicing end the story; in the third, the feasting and rejoicing are left behind as the desperate father tries to make his family whole. The story does not end with the party, but with two men in the field, one urging and comforting, the other resisting, vacillating, or reconciled – we do not know."⁶ We don't know if the elder son lets go of his grudge against his little brother or if the father manages to convince his eldest of the fullness of his love for him. The parable of the lost son leaves us with more questions than answers, like any good parable!

All three of these parables beg the question, in your plenty do you notice what is missing? Or who is missing?

They challenge us to consider what is our responsibility for who or what is missing?

Is this cluster of parables actually training us to see differently?

It takes training to look among our abundance and see what is missing. It takes training to look again at what we take for granted and to see what is at risk of being lost.

Following Jesus, reading the scriptures with an open heart, asking for Holy Spirit guidance to have eyes to see, is a form of training we can take up that will bring new vision for a weary world view.

When it comes to the Kingdom of God, we see what we are trained to see. May we train with the parables.

⁵ Ibid, 51.

⁶ Ibid, 49.