

“The Lost and Found Department”
from Barbara Brown Taylor’s
The Preaching Life

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep... I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.
(Ezek 34:11-12a, 16)

BACKGROUND

- *Context:* These parables are addressed to Pharisees and Scribes (Lk 15:1-3). Jesus, speaking in ch. 14 of the cost of discipleship, concludes “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” Luke then begins this passage saying that the tax collectors and sinners are the ones gathering around to *hear* him.
- *Pharisaical practice:* “Pharisees and legal teachers did not consider it proper to eat with those excluded from the religious community; besides such dangers as eating untithed food, intimate table fellowship connoted acceptance.” (*IVP Bible Background Commentary.*)
- *A note about sheep:* Shepherds often traveled together, and it wasn’t unrealistic for a shepherd to leave his flock (say, with another shepherd) to fetch an errant sheep. (*IVP BBC* and Craig Keener’s Matthew commentary.)

Read Luke 15

1. Prior to reading this sermon, when reading this passage, did you tend to see yourself as the lost sheep or the shepherd?
2. What in Jesus’ ministry do the and sheep coin represent? What does the searching represent? How about finding?

Extra question: These three parables deal with the finding of lost things: a sheep, a coin and a son. “But it is improbable that Jesus (or Luke) intended to do no more than make the same point three times over; and in the context of Scripture as a whole it is arguable that the three illustrations were chosen with an eye to the different shades of meaning they would convey.”¹

Why did Luke include these three parables, and in this order?

3. Think about the lost sheep in your life. If you feel comfortable doing so, share something about those out to whom you are reaching.
4. BBT says this passage “is about questioning the idea that there are certain conditions the lost must meet before they are eligible to be found, or that there are certain qualities they must exhibit before we will seek them out.” What conditions to you, consciously or unconsciously, put on those you reach out to?
5. In her hiking anecdote, Taylor found that once Pat was retrieved, the group found it easier to accept her, and Pat made more of an effort to hike in harmony with them. She concludes,

Maybe some of us are destined to be shepherds and others of us to be lost sheep, but when I am working so hard to find and stay found, it is difficult not to judge those who seem to capitalize on staying lost.

What did you think of BBT’s hiking story as a way to understand the force of these parables? Have you found that the act of seeking the lost affects the way you see them?

¹ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, p. 150. He then proposes that Luke intended a trinitarian reference: {shepherd, woman, father}~{Son, Holy Spirit, Father}. Ambrose, by the way, thought ~{Son, Church, Father} [ACCS, Lk 15]. The *IVP Bible Background Commentary* points out that the “lost” proportion rises with each parable: 1%, 10%, 50%.

6. In his book *Contagious Holiness*, Craig Blomberg discusses ways in which some individuals and churches have, inspired by Jesus' example, used food and table fellowship for outreach to the lonely, the lost, those who can't pay us back and, where possible, even strangers and enemies:
- While living abroad, a family invites guests from a range of backgrounds, Americans and foreign nationals alike, to a Thanksgiving dinner
 - The author and his wife invite an Iraqi couple to dinner
 - "We have welcomed younger adults into our home on three occasions for two-year stretches at a time, including a divorced woman and our first-ever Russian student at Denver Seminary, but all three of our guests were Christians. But good friends of our did bring a troubled young adult into their home for several years and see him turn his life over to Jesus."
 - A church home-and-health ministry complete with food bank helps a "surprisingly large" number of suburban poor
 - A seminary's food closet, especially geared towards international students
 - "These various ministries regularly solicit not merely donations but Christian people willing to take turns in preparing food, hosting meals, coming to organizational outlets where the poor are fed, and delivering food in person to people's homes"
 - A downtown Denver church, geared towards reaching young street and city people, serves a full dinner in conjunction with their weekly Sunday evening services
 - "A second urban Denver congregation, reflecting a broader spectrum of ages and attenders, still finds twenty- and thirty-somethings predominating, but more among the professional ranks. One distinctive of this congregation is its openness to gay and lesbian seekers. Unlike many of the mainline Protestant churches, it does not condone this lifestyle. But neither does it exaggerate the evil of this sin as if it were the worst one imaginable.; the church stresses that all believers struggle throughout their lives with certain temptations."
 - One church, observing in its community a polarization of liberal and conservative groups, organizes supper clubs with a prescribed set of discussion questions meant to jumpstart dialog

Without forgetting that we currently support and participate in the ministries of Cameron and Dimitri House, how else might we creatively use table fellowship in outreach?

7. We are warned in Proverbs of associating with sinners:

He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm. (13:20)

My son, do not go along with [sinners], do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood. (1:15-16; 1:10 for the antecedent)

The Pharisees embraced these cautions; 'Let not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him to the Law' is a later rabbinic saying which characterized their attitude (*New Bible Commentary*).

Reminiscent is 2 Cor 6:14-7:1, where Paul warns against joining in pagan worship (e.g. "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?"). (See also 1 Cor 5:11.)

By contrast, passages like the healing of lepers or the woman with the hemorrhage show that when Jesus came into contact with things unclean, they became clean rather than vice-versa. In the tradition of OT prophets, Jesus considered central to his mission reaching out to sinners (Lk 5:31—he came not for the righteous, but sinners; 19:10—"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."² And Jesus, who sanctifies us, has also sent us into the world as he was sent (Jn 17:16-19). On this topic, Craig Blomberg writes,

² "Other Jewish teachers stressed God's forgiveness for the repentant, but did not stress God's seeking sinners out" (*IVP Bible Background Commentary*).

The sad examples of Christians being corrupted and adopting the sinful practices of their non-Christian acquaintances with whom they associate is a testimony to their unwillingness to rely on the Spirit's power and not a disproof of the viability of Jesus' model. (*Contagious Holiness*)

How have you personally struck a balance—at work, with friends, with relatives, etc.—between reaching out to the wayward and seeking holiness?

8. Taylor writes,

If you receive sinners and admonish the righteous—when the system is clearly set up to work the other way around—then what will happen to the community of faith? What about the good people? What about us?

Is our community oriented toward nourishing the 99 or finding the 100th? Should it change? How?



Fun fact: In the Gospel-of-Thomas (107) version of the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus retrieves it because it's the biggest and it's his favorite.

NEXT TIME: "NONE OF US IS HOME YET"