

Proper 19C: Luke 15.1-10

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Billy Collins once wrote a poem "To A Stranger Born in Some Distant Country Hundreds of Years from Now," in which a dog is wandering around a crowded pub, looking for a head scratch or a belly rub. But it's soaking wet, and everyone in the pub, even the kids, instinctively pushes the damp dog away. The poem ends, "O stranger of the future!/ O inconceivable being!/ whatever the shape of your house,/ no matter how strange and colorless the clothes you/ may wear, I bet nobody there likes a wet dog either./ I bet everybody in your pub/ even the children, pushes her away."

Has it ever occurred to you that you and I are strangers of the future, inconceivable beings for Jesus and the other inhabitants of first century Palestine? The charm of the poem is the sense that, for all the differences in our daily lives, we surely share some deep, instinctive experiences of the world. I bet nobody in Galilee in the year 32 liked a wet dog either.

But are there images or metaphors in the Bible that don't make the trip across the centuries quite as well? I mean, I have it on good authority—the authority of Ebet Peeples, if you must know—that there's not a single regular attendee of Calvary who makes their living as a shepherd. Maybe it's at least time to update some of the characters in the stories. Maybe a parable about a lost non-wet dog would deliver Jesus's point more directly, since you've never roamed the streets of Memphis, calling the name of a sheep that's wandered from your fold.

Except that a sheep isn't just any old livestock for Jesus to choose, is it? The mention of a lamb would have all kinds of deeper resonances for a first century Jew. And Jesus himself will come to be called, not only the Good Shepherd, but the Lamb of God, right? So, let's keep our lost creature a sheep a little longer and see if it has particular wisdom to bear, even to us.

What Jesus draws us into in the parable, of course, is a very basic human response to something loved being lost. Which we all know a version of in the pits of our own stomachs. And that experience in you, he says, is a window into the heart of God. He tells this story because once he's stirred up your own tenderness, your own capacity to drop everything and go searching for one that you love, you've touched something akin to the way your Creator feels about you. And, according to the story, the more you've lost your way, the further you've wandered from your true home, the divine longing for you grows only more intense and the heavenly celebration grows only more joyful once you've been found.

But, as we've noted, the lost creature in Jesus's parable is a lamb, not a dog or a duck. The Baader–Meinhof phenomenon is the fancy term for a frequency illusion. Which is the sense that once something is brought to your attention, you start seeing it everywhere. So, yes. My last sermon was full of sacrificial lambs and scapegoats. It may just be my own frequency illusion at work here. But lambs and sheep—sacrificial and otherwise—do carry a lot of symbolic meaning in the Bible, don't they? Let's see what happens when we let some of that meaning leak into this story.

We tend to use the word “sacrifice” in couple of ways. A good way and a not so good way. If someone sacrifices even a little time for us, we count that sacrifice as a gift. If they’re even willing to suffer pain while meeting our need, that sacrifice is a measure of their kindness, their affection. If you say you’d crawl across broken glass on your knees for me, you’d be telling me you loved me. And if I believed you, believed someone cared enough to help, even if it was painful or hard, gratitude would result. Thankfulness would arise in me when I realize I’m loved that much.

But if my response was, “Well, I have a couple of empty Coke bottles and a hammer right here. Let’s see if you mean what you say...” well, that’s a related, but very different kind of sacrifice. “Crawl across this broken glass on your knees to *prove* that you love me, or because you owe me.” That sacrifice isn’t about gratitude at all. It’s are about how your suffering will somehow even things out between us. And if you don’t think humans still create moral systems in which so many shards of glass embedded in your kneecaps will somehow atone for something you did to me ... well ... do you not know any humans?

Here is how the lamb may figure into both kinds of sacrifice. James Alison notes that on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement in Leviticus, there were actually two lambs. One was sacrificed in the temple. This offering had its roots in the communal gratitude practice of offering the first fruits of the harvest back to God. Not because God was angry or hungry, but because the people were thankful. The first tenth was given back as a way of celebrating the fact that, no matter how hard you worked tending your fields or your flocks, you are not the creator of the life and fruitfulness of this earth upon which all life depends. And if your society happens to get some of its protein from sheep, you’d offer one of your lambs for this communal feast of thankfulness.

The second lamb was different. Instead of being the main course in a nourishing meal of gratitude, the priest ritually laid the violence and sins of the community on this poor beast, and drove it out into the wilderness to die. This terrible sacrifice grew out of an acknowledgement of a very different energy in our lives from gratitude. It was a ritual way of displacing the vengeance and violence that ricochet between humans who keep trying to get even. The act was meant to expose and break the cycle. All that vengeance is put onto what came to be called the scapegoat, and this poor sheep carries our violence outside the camp, hopefully away from us, at least for a while.

The lambs on the Day of Atonement show us both kinds of sacrifice. The sacrifice that arises from thanksgiving, which gathers us together, and the sacrifice of scapegoats, whom we curse and send away to be lost, when we don’t know what else to do with our sins.

So, here’s a question we’ve been circling. When that sheep in Jesus’s parable wanders from the safety of the fold, isn’t there an old echo of meaning suggesting that the Good Shepherd might be dropping everything to go after the scapegoat? Telling us that, now that the ancient ritual has exposed our scapegoating ways, it’s time to see that God finds the scapegoat precious too. In fact, the more sins that are piled on its back, the greater the joy when she’s been unburdened of them, brought lovingly back into the fold. Imagine her thankfulness when she sees that there’s someone who loves her enough to sacrifice everything to go find her and bring her home.

When we look back on these old stories can think we’re too civilized to glean wisdom from the bloody rituals of such primitive people. But this week brought us an anniversary of 9/11, and yet another apparently politically motivated murder, and yet another school shooting, and countless other acts of violence that didn’t make the news. I sometimes wonder if, with regard to violence, we’re a version of what my friends in recovery call a

“dry drunk.” Someone whose sobriety is an illusion, because, even though they’re no longer using, they haven’t come to terms with the deeper forces and patterns that led them into addiction in the first place. At least the old rituals made explicit these forces that are still very much at work in this world. And the stories may still set before us a choice. Will our lives be fired by thankfulness and gratitude, or by vengeance and scapegoating? By the sacrificial love that produces gratefulness? Or the sacrificial mindset that inflicts our pain on to a scapegoat? Is this not still the question that Jesus and the scriptures ask of our lives? Which will it be? In you? In us? Today?

It can seem like the way of violent sacrifice is the only way right now. But, friends, we know it’s not. Not in the least. You won’t read about this in the news, but in the alley behind Calvary early on a Sunday morning, you’ll find a long line of people for who it’s worth the bother to get up at 6 a.m. and walk to a church for a breakfast burrito and maybe a clean pair of pants. And if you ask them all what they’d like prayers for, without fail, at least one person will say, “I want to thank God for waking me up again today.” And there it is. A sacrifice of thanksgiving, not scapegoating, even in the midst of so much need and hardship. I’m not saying that an instance of gratitude undoes the poverty and the hurt and the injustice. It doesn’t. We’ve got so much work to do. But I am bearing witness to the truth that this other force is also very much alive in the world, a billion times a day just in Memphis, I’d wager. It’s alive in each one of us. Choose life, the scriptures beg of us, not death. Choose thankfulness, not scapegoating. God’s world is shot through with these sacrifices of thanksgiving. They’re everywhere, we realize, once they’re brought back to our attention.

There really is still wisdom to be found when we risk a little time travel and enter the old stories with the stuff of our lives today. And so, there is one last disruption of Jesus’s parable I invite you to consider, even for just a breath or two of the gift that is your life. I invite you to imagine the Good Shepherd dropping everything and running after your scapegoat. Taking him in his arms, bringing her home. Can you imagine, if only for a heartbeat, a love that large? And then, can you imagine the thankfulness you’ll know when that very same Love turns around and comes to carry you home too.